Interview with Richard Sackett Thompson

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

RICHARD SACKETT THOMPSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is February 25, 1994. This is an interview with Richard Sackett Thompson on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Dick, could we start out by you giving me something about your background—where you grew up, a little about your family and education, etc.

THOMPSON: My father was a college professor and later Dean at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. He and my mother were both actually from the state of Illinois and thought they were temporarily out west on a one-year assignment. That was in the early thirties and it developed into a permanent job. If you had a job then you kept it. So I was raised in the state of Washington obviously in an academic atmosphere. My father was a professor of French and then head of the department of foreign languages and then later Dean of the College of Sciences and Arts, the last ten years of his career. So I was naturally interested in foreign languages. At the age of 18, my mother and I visited France and I thought this was a wonderful thing, my first trip abroad as an adult.

Q: You were born in 1933?

THOMPSON: October 1, 1933. The trip was the summer of 1952 between my freshman and sophomore years of college. It was a wonderful experience. I then united the family

history of foreign languages with a personal interest in knowing more about fascinating places overseas. I resolved at that time to try to enter the Foreign Service.

Q: Had anyone talked to you about the Foreign Service?

THOMPSON: Before I made this decision there was really no direct recruiting, I vaguely knew we had a State Department and must have people serving abroad, but I really didn't know much about it. Faculty members at Washington State were familiar with the Foreign Service exam and encouraged me to take it.

Q: What were you majoring in in college?

THOMPSON: Well, I majored in political science.

Q: This was where?

THOMPSON: I graduated from Washington State University, which at that time was called Washington State College—the name changed shortly after I graduated. I had a junior year in France 1953-54 under the auspices of Sweet Briar College in Sweet Briar, Virginia, which is still a women's school. So I have a year's credit from Sweet Briar College which is fun to have in your record.

So I had that junior year in France living with a French family and most of my courses were at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris. That was the first time that I really started speaking French to any extent, though I had had some contact with it in the family. I graduated in 1955, was at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar from 1955-57 and since we are here at Lauinger Library at Georgetown, I should add that I eventually got a masters from Georgetown about 1980.

Q: How did you find the Rhodes Scholarship worked out?

THOMPSON: Well, as many Rhodes Scholars do I took the course called “Philosophy, Politics and Economics,” which is supposed to be very general, sort of a liberal arts education. I found this was interesting and it was fun being over there, but I am not sure it was particularly career enhancing to enter the Foreign Service—you don't have to have a college degree anyway. I was at University College, which has become somewhat known because President Clinton was there, but 13 years later than I.

Q: You came back from Oxford and went to Georgetown?

THOMPSON: No, Georgetown was later. The State Department sent me to school for a year at Georgetown 1977-78 and then with some night courses I finished up a masters in 1980.

After leaving Oxford in 1957 I was drafted in January 1958 and spent two years in the army as a draftee before entering the Foreign Service in January, 1960.

Q: Where did you serve?

THOMPSON: I had basic training at Fort Ord in California and was at Fort Huachuca, Arizona for a few months and then spent my last year at Fort Gordon, Georgia at the Civil Affairs and Military Government School. So I was several different places during my two years in the army. That was somewhat educational because I didn't know any of those areas before, especially the South before the civil rights movement really got started.

Q: You got out of the army when?

THOMPSON: As I recall I got out of the army January 8, 1960 and joined the State Department January 9. The army in effect released me before Christmas and with my accumulated leave I was officially in the army until the day I entered the Foreign Service.

Q: Had you taken the Foreign Service Exam?

THOMPSON: I took the written exam in the winter of 1954-55 and the oral in the summer of 1955 in Washington, D.C. when I was on my way to England on the Rhodes Scholarship.

Q: That was the three and a half-day exam wasn't it?

THOMPSON: No, it was just one day. I went up to Spokane, Washington, which is about 80 miles north of Pullman, the regional center where they gave the exam, and took the written exam. At that time you had a written language exam which if you passed that well enough you were already off language probation before you came in. So I had already satisfied my language requirement.

Q: When you came into the State Department in January, 1960, did you go right into a Foreign Service class?

THOMPSON: Well, everyone coming in goes through the famous A-100 course. I have the impression it is somewhat longer now than it was then. I think we had four weeks of general introduction to the State Department, its procedures, how to write what then was called an Airgram, which isn't very much used these days because cable is so much easier, how to write a cable and things of that sort. Since I had spent three of the previous four years studying abroad, I wanted to be assigned to the Department in Washington, D.C. because I was very unfamiliar with the East Coast except for passing through New York on the way to Europe. So, as a result, of course, I was the first person in my class to be sent overseas.

We had some consular training after the basic course and after three months in Washington I was off to Aruba in the Netherlands Antilles. All my A-100 classmates were either assigned to Washington or had to take language training for their posts. None of them had left the country before I did. My effort to remain in Washington came to nought. My first Department tour came after I had been in 15 years.

Q: You were in Aruba how long?

THOMPSON: The post was closed after a year and I was transferred to Cura#ao, which is forty miles away and the capital of the Netherlands Antilles, where we had a consulate general. Aruba had been very important during World War II. The oil refineries on Aruba and Cura#ao provided a large proportion of the oil that the Allied Forces used in World War II. The Germans knew this and tried to shell them from submarines. There was actually one local citizen of Aruba killed by a shell from a German submarine and there was a street named for him. There were large numbers of Americans there to run the oil refineries, but with automation the number of Americans was dwindling very quickly. The State Department had financial pressures stemming from the need to open embassies in a large number of African countries which became independent in 1960. Therefore they were looking for consulates to close, which has been a recurring theme of the State Department administration over the years. So they closed Aruba after I had been there for a year and I went to a neighboring island.

Q: What was the situation in the Netherlands Antilles at this time?

THOMPSON: Well, I would say idyllic. The Dutch took care of foreign affairs and currency and international trade. They had local autonomy which covered internal laws and regulations. The population was a mixture of Dutch, sometimes who had been there for a couple hundred years, and the bulk of the population were the descendants of slaves who had been brought over two or three hundred years earlier during the time of the slave trade. The native Indians in Aruba, Curacao and many other islands were quickly wiped out by European diseases. But Aruba was undeveloped really until an oil refinery was put there in the 1920s. So it had some of the original Indians living on one end of the island and they were still there when I was there.

Basically it was a nice place to swim, to snorkel, etc. Several years after I left Curacao had some serious race riots and the political situation developed unfavorably, but at the time I was there it was very peaceful.

Q: When you went to Curacao I take it you were servicing many of the Americans still on Aruba. Is that true?

THOMPSON: At the time I came in everyone had a consular tour as his or her either first or second tour. Later in the mid-sixties, when the economy was booming they eliminated that requirement and people went directly into political/economic work. Some years later as the economy slowed down again, they started again requiring incoming junior officers to do a consular tour, and that is the situation today. So I had primarily consular work. It is a rather wealthy island and a lot of local people traveled to the States. So, I had a lot of visitors visas. I had some immigrant visas because the West Indian population had been brought in because they spoke English to run the refinery as lower level workers. So there were several thousand West Indians from places like Barbados and Trinidad in Aruba. But also we had upheavals elsewhere in the Caribbean which affected the work load a great deal. In the Dominican Republic you had people trying to revolt against Trujillo often fleeing as political refugees. There was a regular flow of people from the Dominican Republic coming to Aruba because you didn't have to have a visa to get into the Netherlands Antilles and they often had some tale of persecution which was quite believable and they would get sponsors in the United States for immigration visas. Meanwhile in Cuba, you had Castro. So you had two interesting streams. The Dominicans were usually people from the poorer classes of society, not very well educated and socialists. The people fleeing Cuba usually would put on the visa forms their organizations, the Havana Country Club and Miramar Yacht Club. They were a rather different stratum of society. So, most of my work actually was dealing with the people who were trying to get out of other countries and not the local population of Aruba. And this continued in the second year in Curacao.

Q: You were performing consular work in Curacao?

THOMPSON: I was doing consular work in both places pursuant to the personnel policy at that time.

Q: Any major consular problems?

THOMPSON: Well, in human interest terms you meet a lot of interesting people ranging from Miss Aruba or Miss Curacao going to a Caribbean beauty queen contest on the one hand to one man who I gave a visa to finally with some reluctance. He had his pockets full of marijuana when he entered the U.S. so he got picked up. That was unfortunate. So, you have a lot of human interest stories which you probably had plenty of in your other reporting so I won't try to go into them now. It was mostly routine, but now and then there were some interesting cases.

Q: Who was our consul general there at the time?

THOMPSON: I had two. I had Victor Pallister, who passed away some years ago. A very fine gentleman. And then after him Harry Houston who previously had been an FBI agent and deputy head of the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs. He was basically an intelligent, tough cop. A very nice guy with a tremendous record collection. They were both fine people to work for.

Q: No particular problems?

THOMPSON: Well, in Aruba there were some very serious personnel problems. There were only three Americans. There is no particular point in going into that, but it was a very unfortunate introduction to the Foreign Service for a young person.

Q: Sometimes you get into these small posts, especially early on, and it is a little hard to know whether this is the life for you or not. Were you married at the time?

THOMPSON: No, I wasn't married. One advantage of the Foreign Service is, if you are in a tough situation after two or three years you will presumably be transferred out of it or somebody else will be and it will get better. Of course, if you have a situation you like you know that will not last either.

Q: Well, you came back to Washington where you served for two years, from 1962-65. Is that right?

THOMPSON: Yes, in mid 1962 I came back and was assigned to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency which was a new agency at that time. It was quite an exciting time working on the Test Ban Treaty and there was a partial test ban treaty signed during that time. The hot line with the Soviet Union was agreed and there were diplomatic efforts at non-proliferation, etc. I did that actually for two and a half years, from mid 1962 until January, 1965.

Q: As sort of the new boy on the block, what were you doing?

THOMPSON: Well, in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, I was in the International Relations Bureau, and I don't remember the name of the office but we were the office that drafted and cleared the instructions to the delegation, usually in Geneva, as to how they should deal with various disarmament topics. There was something there called the 18 Nation Disarmament Conference, organized under UN auspices. France wouldn't take part, De Gaulle refused to take part, so there were actually only 17 countries there. I went over for a few months. Every new person got some time in Geneva to see how things went over there. You had an empty seat where France was so the rotating chairman would suddenly jump from Canada to India with France in between. It was typical multilateral political work, but things were not moving very quickly so it was only now and then that some new instructions would go out to the delegation. Otherwise people were repeating the same speeches for long periods of time.

Q: How did this work? You had your delegation there while you are back in Washington doing the instructions. How did they report and how were the instructions developed and what were some of the issues?

THOMPSON: The final version of the instructions, of course, would be a cable cleared by 15 or 16 people, but there were usually months if not years of interagency consideration of things like the test ban treaty. For years there had been people, especially in the time of the old Atomic Energy Commission, also in the State Department, who had been working on putting forward disarmament proposals. After World War II, you recall, there were two main trends. One was something called general and complete disarmament (GCD). That was really a myth, but everybody had to subscribe to the myth and that was one of the main things we were theoretically negotiating on in this 18 nation conference. The other area was controlling nuclear weapons. That was somewhat more realistic to try to damp that down, reduce the possibility of proliferation to additional countries, slow the growth of the arsenals of the current nuclear powers and things like that. So you had negotiating going on in both those broad areas in Geneva in the context of this 18 nation conference which consisted of five from the East, five from the West, and eight neutrals, as I recall. This forum still exists. I think the number has been expanded and is up in the 40s now. I am not sure how they do any useful work at all but it is a forum that is still going on.

Q: Was your role more like that of a secretariat waiting and adjusting all the things and trying to put them into some cohesiveness and then get clearance? Was that how it worked?

THOMPSON: Yes. I guess ideas for new positions could come from various places, other agencies, the White House. ACDA was a new agency and was headed by a Republican to provide Kennedy with political protection from the Republicans. The man behind it really was Hubert Humphrey who had been promoting the idea for years and finally got an agency to study the possibility of arms control and disarmament and not just focus on war making. So the ideas would come from various areas. There was a lot of contact

with the academic world. On looking back, I can't give one simple coherent outline of how policy was made, but the high level people would decide that this would be a fruitful field to work on based on all the knowledge and contacts they had and detailed papers would be developed.

As a low ranking person I had relatively little substantive input into these papers. I would get a memorandum which had been cleared by the White House saying here is how we are going to carry out our negotiations on the partial test ban and I would rewrite it into a cable with slightly different language and clear it with all the various involved agencies and get it sent out. Sometimes position papers could be developed during holidays in Washington during recesses so the delegation might carry instructions back in the form of a memorandum, so they didn't always have to go out in cables.

Q: In these interviews we try to capture the spirit of the times and the perspective of the person we are talking to. Obviously this was new to you. Here is a new agency, what was the feeling you were getting from your colleagues and yourself about the prospects for doing anything in these fields at that time?

THOMPSON: The people who were there, by and large were very dedicated believers in what they were doing. You had a mixture. You had military personnel assigned to the agency who were very capable and cautious and very able. You had outside academics, the true believers who had been brought in. I think one of them was Richard J. Barnett, who is still very active in his own think tank here. People of that sort. Some of them are still in the agency after these many years working in their various areas. You had relatively very few Foreign Service officers. I think right now there are probably six Foreign Service officers in the Disarmament Agency, which is surprisingly few to my mind, but people experienced in negotiating and diplomacy who can deal with the actual negotiating side of it and make sure that is carried out adequately. These people are usually realistic, hard headed people overall. So you had this mixture in the agency, but over all, since it had just been founded there were a lot of fruitful areas and we were talking with the Soviets

about common interests in arms control. While I was there, you may recall, there was the Cuban missile crisis. After that both countries, the Soviet Union and the United States, realized they needed to get along and were seeking ways of cooperation. So it was a fruitful time then for negotiations for the partial test ban agreement and other agreements being concluded. The atmosphere was quite positive.

A footnote to this. For the previous five years there had been a small staff attached directly to the Secretary of State who had been doing disarmament matters. When this new agency was formed, suddenly these people found themselves two or three layers removed from the Secretary of State with not only the head of the agency but bureau directors over them, so they moved out fairly quickly into other things and often had very good careers. One of them was Ron Spiers who joined the Foreign Service and has had an outstanding career. Another is James Goodby, who also ultimately joined the Foreign Service as a career and became ambassador, etc. There were a couple of others whose careers ended up less brilliantly. But it was interesting how this group of people who had moved out...

Q: They weren't moved over to the agency? They were left to sort of wither away?

THOMPSON: I assume that this group was dissolved right after ACDA was formed. These experts were moved over to ACDA but were dissatisfied there as I mentioned earlier. They were not given top positions in ACDA.

Q: What was the impression you were getting both from working with the delegation and back in Washington, about what the attitude towards the Soviets was and the way of negotiating? Did they feel that the Soviets were serious or just marking time?

THOMPSON: It was recognized by those dealing with the substance of the issues that general and complete disarmament was a myth, but everybody had to give it lip service, and of course you had the neutrals there whose job was to push the evil people, the two blocs, towards negotiation. Everybody realized that was a myth. In the nuclear disarmament area people realized that some degree of control and rationality and mutual

understanding was in the mutual interest of both countries. And also, in addition to formal negotiating sessions, you had tea breaks and that was often where significant changes and ideas would be floated, perhaps between the two heads of delegation over tea rather than in a session with 17 delegations sitting around and UN interpreters, of course, simultaneously interpreting everything in several languages. So it was a fruitful forum and I think people realized there was a common interest in certain areas.

Q: Was there any feeling of trying to put one over on the Soviets or one-upmanship or something like that?

THOMPSON: There was relatively little of that. These negotiations were a reflection of the overall relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union, or broadly the Western world and the Soviet bloc at that time. As a result of the missile crisis it was a time when both were seeking to find an accommodation that would reduce the threat of nuclear war. Kennedy had that image in one of his speeches..."Nuclear war that is hanging over the world like a sword of Damocles"...which struck a lot of imaginations. I think both sides felt there was a lot of truth to that and that they should reduce the possibility of war. And as I say there were these private talks that you would have sort of on the margins of the formal negotiations in which you would develop a certain personal rapport. As far as putting anything over on anybody, these negotiations...obviously there were so many people in both countries looking very critically at any concession that you might make, that anything any country did had been considered at such tremendous length that it would be hard to imagine putting anything over on anybody, accepting something that wasn't in mutual interest.

Q: There wasn't much posturing I take it then?

THOMPSON: As I think back on that period, I don't think so. The Soviets, perhaps a little more, as I think back. Every year at the United Nations, the Soviets would reveal some new arms control and disarmament initiative designed to make them look good. Until you

asked the question I had forgotten that. The one annual event at the UN would be the new Soviet proposal of some sort, which might be something at least superficially plausible, but not...

Q: Did you sort of sit around and wait for that shoe to drop?

THOMPSON: Yes. We knew something was coming.

Q: Just to get a little feel for the atmospherics, here you were sitting in ACDA, the Cuban missile crisis lasted a couple of weeks. What was the feeling in ACDA? Was everything put on hold?

THOMPSON: I can't remember, I am just trying to remember whether I was in Washington or Geneva at the time. I think I was in Washington.

Q: I was in Belgrade, Yugoslavia at the time. I didn't think we would end up fighting.

THOMPSON: Of course, the people I was working with were pretty sophisticated about the situation. You recall in the 1960 Presidential campaign there had been a lot of talk about a missile gap. But it quickly became apparent that any gap was the other way. We were launching these massive programs and meanwhile the Russians had a handful of missiles which had to be charged with liquid fuel which took a long, long time and we would have had all sorts of warning time. They really didn't have much at all. So at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, our leaders knew that and also that we had overwhelming conventional superiority in the area of Cuba. So we could do whatever we wanted with Cuba. I think the people I worked with felt the chance of a nuclear war was pretty low.

Q: David Bell was the administrator during most of that time?

THOMPSON: No, it was William Foster. He was the director.

Q: I was wondering how he operated?

THOMPSON: I didn't see him very often but I think he was well respected and very highly regarded. I was in a few meetings with him and liked him very much.

Q: Did you feel that you were kind of outsiders at the State Department?

THOMPSON: I think that is true. I knew a few people that I had to clear cables with but I...and I had some social life, there was something called the Junior Foreign Service Officers Club which would meet and I would become acquainted with some colleagues in that. Bureaucratically I was cut off from State and not really...I didn't have a chance to learn early in my career how the State Department operates and gets things done and I think that was unfortunate as time went on.

Q: Were you aiming for an overseas assignment after your tour in ACDA?

THOMPSON: At that time you would submit some indication of the posts or at least the areas of the world you would like to go to. Since I had wanted service in Washington I certainly didn't object to being in the agency. Perhaps in hindsight I realize it wasn't as valuable as a real Department tour would have been. When my two years were up the personnel system was saying that it was time for Thompson to move on. They were looking at what they might do with me. Finally, I was called in by Personnel in January, 1965 and they said, “We have these two positions we think you are designed for.” I think I had asked for economic work in an underdeveloped country. I wanted some Third World experience. So they said, “You have a choice. You can be number three in Niger or you can be number 14 in Tanzania. In Tanzania it would be a consular job with a lot of political reporting responsibility for dealing with political refugees from surrounding countries, etc. In Niger you would be number three and would be doing a variety of work.” So, I went for the Niger job. When I came into the Foreign Service in 1960 there was a lively discussion of what the best career track was. Whether you should become a generalist, which to us at that time meant somebody who had been in various parts of the world and done various kinds of work, or whether the better career path was to become a real expert in one area

of the world and become known as a good person in that area. I think, in fact, getting connected with one bureau's area of the world is probably the better way for advancement. I am not sure it is as interesting. I had a very interesting career but might have gone farther if I had specialized in one part of the world.

Q: It is kind of fun to see other places. It makes for a fuller person.

THOMPSON: Of course, there are certain people who are the most outstanding people that everybody wants. I am not one of the most outstanding examples of that. When I was in Geneva, one of my fellow low ranking officers there was Tom Pickering who now has the rank of career ambassador, the highest rank in the Foreign Service. Tom at that time was complaining about slow promotions but thereafter was promoted five times in six years, which is very unusual indeed because it requires a waiver even to be considered after less than a year in rank. So, with somebody like Tom Pickering every bureau is angling for his services and he served all around the world in all kinds of jobs. And there are other people like that, for example, Charles Freeman, Ambassador Freeman who is currently assistant Secretary of Defense and was previously ambassador in Saudi Arabia. He has been in several parts of the world. But some of these top performers will do well whatever they do, but I think the average person is better off specializing in one part of the world.

Q: Before we move on to your next post, you mentioned that you belonged to the Junior Foreign Service Officers Club. I recall this time was a time of a certain amount of ferment. This is the Kennedy era and if you are a junior officer you are better than being a mid-career or senior officer. Did you get this feeling that this is an era in which youth is to be revered?

THOMPSON: I would hate to generalize along those lines.

Q: It just seemed like one was very much aware of what junior officers were thinking. Before and more or less after they were much more taken for granted. Our Director

General today at one point was the head of that group, Genta Hawkins. She was considered sort of a bomb thrower at the time.

You went to Niger, to Niamey, where you served from 1965-67. What was the situation in Niger and what were our interests at the time?

THOMPSON: Niger was very peaceful. I think in all of those small countries in West Africa you have a similar situation. In 1960 when it became independent, the US had to make decisions whether to put embassies in every little country or not. The French had hoped for two large countries with roughly eight provinces each. You would have had a French West Africa and a French Equatorial Africa. But the units within them were given a chance to opt for independence and every last one of them did. So Dakar might be the Vienna of West Africa. Dakar had big public buildings because it was supposed to be the head of a vast country in that part of Africa. Instead it was the capital of one small country. We decided, in view of the competition with the communists for influence around the world, we had to have an embassy in every country. I think Loy Henderson had a large role in making that decision. It was because of that that Aruba was closed in an attempt to find the resources to open all these new embassies.

So, if you looked at the embassies in Niger, there were only countries which had some specific reason to be there. You had the French because they were the Mother country. You had the United States to keep the communists out. You had Taiwan, the Republic of China, to keep the Mainland Chinese out. You had the West Germans to keep the East Germans out. And then you had the neighboring African countries. That's it. So there was a relatively small number of embassies. You knew everyone in the diplomatic corps.

I think the US had this broader political interest. It is a country of modest resources and I am sure with a swollen population they are having a difficult time economically now just feeding their people. There were 3 million when I was there and I think it is 6 or 7 million people now. A very fragile ecology based on the...during the rainy season you

can raise sorghum and millet, especially along the Niger River. Some areas are suitable as pastureland for livestock. The French had started some peanut industry, but all very modest.

One interest I might comment on is that of human rights. At that time the US had really not discovered human rights as an aspect of its policy that it should at least try to apply more or less around the world. Of course, to start with the French had rigged the 1960 election so that it would bring out the winner they wanted. Everywhere except in Guinea, where Sekou Toure was so powerful the French were unable to get their man in. In Niger they had rigged the election of a man, who already had a certain respect because he was a schoolteacher and had taught many of the educated people of the country. So he became president.

Q: Who was that?

THOMPSON: Hamani Diori. Jibo Bakeri, the mayor of Niamey, was the head of the opposition party. Since independence there had been various uprisings, I don't know quite why, that the government would put down. Every morning I drove a couple of blocks from my house to the embassy and passed a building that had been built to be the new police station, but instead had become a prison for several dozen political prisoners. The building had narrow vertical windows with no glass so that you could let the sun in and keep the prisoners from getting out. So you could see these shadowy figures through these vertical slits and realize there were people in there with probably no trial or no cause. But we were just not thinking about things like that in those days.

The president was an earnest man and seemed dedicated to the development of his country. I think he was a good man. He was trying to learn English. So he had an English class every Sunday morning at eleven, I think it was, he had English classes all week but on Sunday it was open house for any Americans who wanted to come. So any Peace Corps volunteer in the country who was in town on Sunday morning was asked to

automatically come by the palace. And I attended sometimes too. Every now and then...we didn't have much tourism in Niger...some Britisher who happened to be at the main hotel would find himself invited to the presidential palace so that the president could get to hear a number of American and British accents. He was trying to get out from under French domination by studying English. We had a few AID projects of various sorts trying to see what could be done in the way of well digging and improved crops, etc.

I think our interest was mainly trying to keep them out from under communist domination, which is a rather negative goal.

Q: What was your job there?

THOMPSON: Well, I was number three although later a fourth person came. Technically I was the economic officer. You had the ambassador and the DCM and then the third officer, who was me, who handled economic reporting, quite a bit of political reporting, and what consular work there was which was mainly issuing visas for officials to visit the States.

Q: How was it dealing with the government at your level?

THOMPSON: It was very friendly and pretty relaxed. As I recall the dealings they were all generally quite easy. There were no big visa and immigration problems with local officials. In the AID area we were giving them stuff and they were glad to receive it with a smile. Generally they voted with us in the UN. If we were voting with France, they were voting with us because France was the country that had the dominant influence.

Q: How did you find the French influence there?

THOMPSON: Well, the French had a very strong influence. Most government ministries still had a French conseiller technique, technical advisor, who in some cases still ran the ministry in effect. They had removed the conseiller technique from their police

organization, so they had gotten out from under the French somewhat in that area. First there was a currency zone which recently dissolved a few months ago. There was a currency zone of French West Africa which was backed by France, another good reason to remain on the good side of France. So, French influence was still very strong. A program the government had to make people literate in their local languages—there was Djerma, Hausa, Fulani, three or four of the main languages. The government had a program to make them literate in their own languages and our Peace Corps volunteers to some degree were involved in this. The French didn't like this, they wanted the people to become literate in French and nothing else. They thought it was a waste of time for these people to become literate in a language which didn't have any literature for them to read anyway if they could read it. The government felt that simple instructions on hygiene and simple crop agriculture could be written in the local language and understood and acted upon, so they thought it was useful to have instruction in local languages. The French were unhappy that we were working with the government in this area.

Of course, when the French ran the country very few people got any education. As in their other colonies, even at the elementary level there was relatively little schooling.

Q: Did you find at your level in dealing with the French that they sort of brushed you aside or kept you at arm's length?

THOMPSON: No, on the contrary. The French and American Ambassadors apparently wanted to keep on good terms with each other and they entertained each other and discussed programs between themselves, etc. So we had friendly relations with the French embassy. Of course, it was a relatively small European colony in an African country, so there was some tendency for cultural reasons for the diplomatic corps to stay on good terms with each other. So we had very good relations with the French.

Q: While you were there the ambassador was Robert Ryan?

THOMPSON: Yes, all the time I was there. Robert J. Ryan.

Q: How did he operate?

THOMPSON: He was really a top-notch person and operated with great good sense. He was an example of...there was always the issue within the State Department of whether people who specialized in the administrative area could become ambassadors. Bob Ryan had come up as an administrative officer. He was certainly an effective ambassador and was an example that you could rise through the administrative ranks and become an ambassador. Our neighboring country was Upper Volta, the capital being Ouagadougou. I have been to Ouagadougou and Timbuktu which shows the advantages of the Foreign Service. In that country the ambassador was Tom Estes who had previously been deputy assistant secretary of State in charge of building the new State Department building which I think began in 1957 and parts started to be opened in 1960, roughly speaking. His reward for doing a good job on that was to be named ambassador to Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso. So in these two neighboring, somewhat isolated, landlocked African countries, you had the two ambassadors who were examples of how you could get to be an ambassador through the administrative ranks.

That is putting Robert Ryan in a larger context. He was a very able man. He traveled around the country. Let me mention the traveling. That was great fun because when he was ambassador he would be received around the country in these mud forts like in the movie “Beau Geste.” Zinder is one of the main towns of Niger, recalling “Fort Zinderneuf” of “Beau Geste”. When I traveled with the ambassador, as we approached a town there would be a line of camels and horsemen on both sides in sort of imitation coats of armor because centuries before the knights had come down across the desert and conquered the tribes on the southern edge here, so they still had some elements of European coats of armor in what they would wear. Helmets over their heads and chain mail skirts, etc. and everything brightly colored. So you would have these people on both sides forming a hedge of honor, as they say in French, an honor guard on both sides as you came to the

gate of the mud fort. There the prefect would greet you. So the ambassador and I would have to get out of the car a little before we actually got to the gate and walk forward and be greeted and ushered inside, etc. You would have a Griot shouting, “Vive l'ambassadeur, vive l'ambassadeur” as you approached, which added a festiveness to the occasion. So traveling with the ambassador was quite fun. And Bob Ryan had skin problems. He had very fair skin and had to wear a straw hat all the time, so he would be carrying out these ceremonies wearing a straw hat so his skin would not be affected. He carried out these important representational duties with some personal cost, I think. I really liked him very much. He is still very active in public affairs and is living in Florida.

Q: This was early Peace Corps. How did you feel they were doing?

THOMPSON: We had an excellent program due in large part to an excellent director, C. Payne Lucas, who is now the head of an organization called “AfriCare” which tries to improve technical assistance to African countries. There were a hundred and some Peace Corps volunteers, but he saw that the problem with our programs in a number of countries was we simply would be put into education. While I was there the Peace Corps in Nigeria almost went on strike, and Jack Vaughn, the head of the Peace Corps, had to come out and curtail the strike. The problem with the Peace Corps volunteers in Nigeria was they got no respect. They were all Rodney Dangerfields. From the point of view of their students they were low paid and rode bicycles so were obviously an inferior type of teacher. Their fellow teachers, who got paid much more and had mopeds, looked down on the volunteers for the same reasons. The volunteers thought they were doing great things for somebody, but they were just cheap teachers from the point of view of the government of Nigeria and not performing any special function at all. So they were very unhappy and were striking for more money and mopeds.

Q: Mopeds being motor scooters as opposed to a bicycle you pump yourself.

THOMPSON: Yes. The Nigerian teachers got more money and had better quarters and rode mopeds. So you could see the social situation that made the Peace Corps volunteers unhappy.

Now in Niger, our director saw the problems of this sort of thing and had our people working on programs very directly related to the people, which were really helpful. There was the literacy project, they dug wells, which everybody liked in such an arid climate. One very large program was trying to establish rural cooperatives because the local farmers, so to speak, were under the thumb of the local moneylenders who charged usurious rates from them and were also the only source of seed and farm implements. So they were trying to establish cooperatives across the country which would get the farmer independent of this. Money would be loaned at fair rates and you would have access to seed and tools and the few simple things they did need at a fair price. So, they were monopoly busters around the country and working directly with the people and their Niger counterparts. These people were living in mud huts where you have large spiders around the walls, and geckos running across the walls as well as making a lot of noise, and they had one tiny little gas operated refrigerator which might make one tray of ice a day or cool off a precious can of Coke or something. They were living in very poor conditions around the country and I visited a lot of them. But they believed in their work and were happy. So they were much worse off in a sense than the people in Nigeria, but they were happy because they had a good program. C. Payne Lucas was an inspiring leader and we had a great Peace Corps program.

Q: When you left Niger, what was your feeling towards whither Niger at that time?

THOMPSON: I just didn't see anything there that you could develop. The one hope they had, which was realized in only a very small way, was that uranium would be mined. There were uranium deposits in the northern part of the country and this is something that they thought might save them economically and provide a big boost. I sent a message on these reports to Washington and to Paris and asked Paris if they knew anything

because the French were very closed mouth about this. We got no response from our science attach# in Paris except the annual report of the French Atomic Commission which seemed to indicate that the French had uranium coming out of their ears. But there was no direct response from anybody. Shortly after I left it was announced that there was a big uranium strike up there and I think it was recently closed down. But perhaps for a couple of decades they got some budgetary support from the French and a relatively small number of jobs. But it didn't make any major difference in their economy. It is a problem that I see not only there but in many other underdeveloped countries. There is really nothing there to develop. Internally we have a somewhat similar problem with Appalachia, my ancestors come from West Virginia, but there, of course, the younger people simply go elsewhere and leave a relatively small population up in the mountains. To a considerable degree that has happened in West Africa. There has been a lot of movement among countries which eventually creates political problems as people flee the countries where there isn't anything. Along the coast you have some substantial agriculture and Nigeria has oil, but I never could see how you could develop Niger. This shows the artificiality of political boundaries. I am not sure they really surrounded any viable economic entity.

Q: We are now into 1967 and you are leaving Niger. Where did you go and how did you go that way?

THOMPSON: Well, let's see. Before I went to Niger I had asked for economics in a developing country and I got it and was happy there, even as a single person. I might add one humorous note here that a lot of people when assigned to Niger quickly got married. We had a couple of marriages there and others would get married before they ever got there. People proposed to their current sweethearts. A USIA officer proposed to a female USIA officer before he came. The admin officer got married. Our GSO got married. It was a rather isolated country without much nightlife. But I was not yet ready to get married and I thoroughly enjoyed the country. Nowadays the young people don't bother to get married and bring their partners to the country and the Foreign Service has a lot of single people who have somebody living with them overseas without any official status. One of the many

trends of the Foreign Service at the present time. Only about half of them are married, I think. About half of the Foreign Service is single at this time but less than half of this group is living alone.

I had volunteered a couple of years earlier for Vietnam and had been sent to Niger instead. But now they picked me up on that and I was quite happy to go to Vietnam and I guess this puts me in a different situation than a lot of people at that time. I felt that was where the action was and I wanted to be there. So most of 1967 I was in Vietnamese language training.

Q: Where were you taking Vietnamese?

THOMPSON: Well, it was in the old Foreign Service Institute, which was also where I had the A-100 course when I first came in, which was in a remodeled garage under what is now River Place, then called Arlington Towers, in Rosslyn. I remember that when I first went in I wondered why you had this wide door and sort of sloping ramp down to the registrar and information desk. It was only years later I realized that was because it had been a garage and was for the cars to drive in. So I spent 40-42 weeks studying Vietnamese.

Q: You already had probably a better grounding than most Foreign Service people in French, how did you find coming up against tonal languages?

THOMPSON: Well, I had also done a lot of singing, so maybe that helped. You weren't allowed into the course unless you showed a relatively good aptitude. When you come into the Foreign Service there is or was a test that you took called, “Modern Language Aptitude Test.” I think all of us scored fairly high on that. People varied in their diligence and ability to learn, but most of us managed to do it, I think. And it was quite intensive. We had six hours a day with a different teacher each hour for the benefit of either the students or the teachers, or both, so you heard a variety of approaches and accents, but all working on

the FSI method which emphasizes repeating phrases and sentences after teachers to get it right. It emphasizes the oral use of the language.

Q: How did you come out of that?

THOMPSON: I felt very uncomfortable. Although I operated in Vietnamese at times for the following five years, I never felt really comfortable in it. I think perhaps because I was a little old, by now I was in my mid-30s, and I never really felt that I mastered the language even though in fact I was a good student and after I had been in Vietnam for a while I tested 4/4. I really felt my 4/4 in French was much more meaningful in actually being able to communicate with people in a nuance complex way than it was in Vietnamese.

Q: Did you get some area studies while you were at FSI?

THOMPSON: There were some lectures. Just after I left I think they improved and strengthened that part of the program. I thought that was pretty lacking. I had language training and not much area studies.

Q: I came through a little bit later in the garage too, but I got two weeks to familiarize myself with the language which was impossible, but I got the area studies program which was rather an intense series of lectures.

THOMPSON: I think we specifically did not get the area studies, only now and then there would be some especially distinguished lecturer and we would go hear that one and be let out of our language lessons to do it. But, otherwise I thought it was very weak on area studies, I didn't really have much of an idea of what was going on in Vietnam or the area's history and background, or anything when I went over there.

Q: You got there in 1968. When in 1968 did you get there?

THOMPSON: Well, I got there a few days before the Tet attack in January. My boss said, “Well, things are very quiet Dick, you will travel around with Peter Collins seeing how we

do it and working up your language capability for a few weeks before you strike out on your own."

Q: You were going to be what?

THOMPSON: I was going to be in what was called the Provincial Reporting Unit which was a group of eight officers plus a boss who among them covered the four Corps areas of the country—I Corps, II Corps, III Corps and IV Corps. IV Corps was the Delta. We had relatively few American troops in the Delta so it was rather different from the other areas. Peter Collins, who had been there for several months already, and I shared the Delta, we shared the provinces. He took the important ones and I took the less important ones...that is not quite true because it was partly geographic. In the end, because of the Tet attack, instead of taking it easy, as soon as we could catch a chopper down to the Delta...we both caught the same plane down to Can Tho, the capital of the Delta and then fanned out visiting our provinces riding choppers, scheduled Air America Lines, or taking a vehicle, to see what the situation was in these various provinces after Tet.

Q: Could you describe your experiences after Tet, you had just arrived?

THOMPSON: I was sharing an apartment with another man several blocks from the embassy. I could hear a lot of shooting but I didn't know what was going on except by phone. I was advised by my boss to stay put.

Q: Your boss was whom?

THOMPSON: Tom Cochran. I stayed put in my apartment until close to noon the following day when my apartment mate, who was a military officer also serving in the embassy, came by and gave me a ride down to the embassy. It was a distance I could have walked, but I wasn't about to walk around the streets without having some idea of what was going on. So I got to the embassy about 11:00 the next day. There were still some Viet Cong

bodies in the courtyard that had not yet been taken away, and of course the place was all shot up and there was a lot of confusion.

Q: Here you are brand new. What was your feeling about how this thing had happened and its effectiveness?

THOMPSON: I just don't recall having that kind of conversation. Nobody had all that amount of time to talk to me. The only thing I remember was the urge to get Peter Collins and me out to visit our provinces as soon as that could possibly be done so that we could be doing after action reports. I don't really have a feel for the mood in the embassy. I was just accepting whatever happened and not really thinking about the longer term.

Q: There is a certain point when you come in you are not in a very reflective mood, you are just absorbing this brand new thing. What happened in the Delta during the Tet, Tet was not just a one day thing?

THOMPSON: You are absolutely right. The part I remember very clearly, I would go up to the roof of the apartment house and it was like a fireworks display. All around town you would have choppers shooting tracers down around the suburbs where the fighting went on for some time. And the people on the ground sometimes firing up at the helicopters. Then flares being dropped all around. It was a spectacle that I would watch from my roof. As I recall, I was probably down in the Delta for a while and came back and it was still going on. As you say it lasted for quite some time.

In the towns I visited in the Delta, of course, there had been some very heavy fighting for a while but they were repulsed from all province capitals, and I was visiting basically province capitals. So very typically I would come in on a helicopter and as you would see the town from above you would have some modest masonry structures in the middle of town, which may or may not have been partly damaged by the fighting, and then you would have a large area of burned out huts. It was reed huts that they lived in and they burned easily. So, you would have one quadrant from the center of town out which was

where the attack had taken place, been repulsed and there was a lot of burned houses. So you had a burned area as a segment of each province capital. And then, I landed and would talk to the senior Americans; the local politicians, where to be honest I usually used French rather than Vietnamese because that was a much easier way for us to communicate; and the local priests, the Buddhist priests, the Cao Dai sect leaders, if they were there, and the Catholic priests, of course. I would talk to people like this with positions in society to get their views of what had happened at Tet, from all points of view —military, our development programs, what propaganda by the VC was circulating, etc. For a while there we just threw everything into our reports that we could think of that might be of use to try to analyze what happened.

So, it was a fascinating time. Every place there seemed to be some unusual circumstance that caused the VC plan to go awry. I won't try to recite what they all were, but every place felt that the VC had almost succeeded in taking over but because of some factor that had suddenly intervened that was favorable to the government side they had been pushed back in every case, so they took no province capital in the Delta, nor did they take the capital of the Delta, Can Tho, itself, where there was some very heavy fighting. Of course, they did take Hue in the north and were pushed out after a month of fighting. That was a somewhat different situation.

Q: What was the feeling both of the Vietnamese and the American side about Tet then, that you were getting from the Delta? Was this basically looked upon as a success or was it shock and dismay?

THOMPSON: That was where you had this great dichotomy between how things looked on the ground and how they looked in the United States. On the ground the VC had been pushed back with very heavy losses. They had such heavy losses that they really decimated the VC in the sense of the southern armed forces. The north which, of course, was running the whole thing, Hanoi, had to send northern troops into the Delta after that to provide them a fighting force in the Delta because their southern branch had become

so decimated. It was a military defeat for the Communists, but a political victory because the reaction of the United States was that people felt that they had been misled that things were going better and that the enemy no longer had such a capability.

Q: Were you getting a feeling from the Vietnamese of pride and confidence that they had taken care of this matter?

THOMPSON: Oh, very definitely. In the Delta, with very few exceptions, it was Vietnamese troops who managed to do the job. So they were really very proud of the fact that they had taken the best shot of the VC and taken them out.

Q: So you finished this survey and went back to embassy and made your reports?

THOMPSON: Yes. It wasn't a survey, I did the same thing for 18 months. I tried to hit all my provinces the first couple of weeks to get a view of what happened after Tet and then after that I would be more selective. I did not have to go back to Saigon to deliver my reports because I could turn them in to the CIA operator in Can Tho. So Peter Collins and I usually met and cooperated on the reports. We just typed them out as best we could and gave them to the CIA telegraph operator and he would send them in. Of course the CIA was glad to have them because they could use them to check against their own reports. Sometimes the people in the embassy would mutter that the CIA got our reports before our own bosses did. But, anyway, the information could be transmitted that way. Other times we would travel back to Saigon and stay there a few days and write our reports and then go back out again. There was no set pattern to it really.

For each Corps you had two officers. One of the two would live in Saigon and one would live in the region. Peter Collins lived in Can Tho and I in Saigon. The vague idea behind this was that they wanted some people around in Saigon so if they suddenly needed to consult about what was happening there might be somebody there—except if you were

doing your job you wouldn't be there either. This was true except for I Corps in the north which was too far away and both officers lived up there.

Q: You were under the political section?

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right.

Q: What was your impression of the political section and how it operated during this period?

THOMPSON: Well, it was very good. The ablest officers, without calling myself an able officer, generally very capable people were being assigned to Vietnam. It had a priority in the world to get the best people. So, by and large, they were very excellent officers to work with. I think the total officers in the political section was something like 25, because you had 8 on the Provincial Reports; a similar number working on internal politics at the Saigon level, the various parties and organs of government; you had a labor attach#; a political military section. It was a very large political section indeed.

Then, when you got up to the top leadership of the embassy, of course, you got into some interesting and sometimes controversial people.

Q: Could you talk about some of these people?

THOMPSON: Without naming any names at the moment, I think one problem in Vietnam in understanding what was going on was that a lot of the top people had been in Korea. I think there is a very clear difference which these people didn't grasp. In Korea, the Communists had virtually taken over the whole peninsula before we drove them north, so all Koreans hated the Communists. In Vietnam, on the contrary, the Communists had the prestige of having defeated the French. They by and large presented a humane face in the areas where they did control and there was much more ambivalence about the Viet Cong even among the people who presumably were on our side or our supporters.

The government that we were supporting, these were the generals who had sided with the French puppets fighting the Viet Minh Communists who embodied the cause of nationalism. There was this concept of chinh nghia, leading or main principle, which might be translated “righteous cause. I find it hard to define but you have it or you don't and the Communists tended to have it because the driving force of the society tended to be more in their hands because of these factors I mentioned. So even the people I would deal with that were staunchly anti-communist, nevertheless had real admiration for the people on the other side who suffered privation, did not have luxurious living, lived out in the jungle for years and worked hard. Ho Chi Minh, himself, was known for his ascetic style of living and they would contrast this with the corrupt life-style of the military government in Saigon. So for the Vietnamese their loyalties were often very ambiguous and a person would have a brother fighting on the other side and things like that. I think the Americans who came in with Korean experience where things were black and white, did not realize the ambiguity of the situation in Vietnam and how people were not really staunchly anti-communist in a sense, even though all this fighting and dying was going on. The people had a respect if not sympathy for the other side. I think this was an important difference.

I don't want to name too many names, but I think an example of the Korean school would be Sam Berger...

Q: Yes. He had been ambassador to Korea.

THOMPSON: ...who I liked very much. Shortly after I arrived there was a Vietnamese member of the parliament who was calling for a peace settlement involving a coalition government. Well, that was the position of the North, the Communists, in the negotiations, so he was eventually imprisoned. The senior Americans couldn't understand how the Vietnamese could have any sympathy for a man who was advocating the enemy point of view. But, of course, if you have this more ambiguous view of the war and the conflict, why it certainly made sense to the Vietnamese to call for a coalition government which would end the fighting and bring peace and reconciliation to the country.

Q: Martin Herz was the political counselor most of the time you were there wasn't he?

THOMPSON: Yes.

Q: How do you think he saw things? He is one of the intellectuals of the Foreign Service.

THOMPSON: He was an example of that. At the end of his tour he wrote a memo called "Bell Ringers," and I wish I had it somewhere. He described in there several incidents, for example a conversation with a leading general who said he had a brother who was a general on the other side, etc. which to him brought forth this ambiguity of the war and of feelings toward the war which I am describing to you which I thought most people would get from the New York Times before even going to Vietnam.

Q: Was there sort of a feeling that you have to think positively? We had a great commitment there, obviously, did you have a feeling that maybe we were thinking too positively all the time?

THOMPSON: Well, of course, you have to feel positively. The President says we are going to hold out here and you do your best to carry out the mission. I think the lower down you got in the hierarchy the more pessimistic you were about the long term chances because you could see the continuing strength and respect for the VC out in the countryside and the weaknesses on our side. But the view became progressively more rosy as you went from the village level to the district level to the province level to the Saigon level and then back to D.C.

I was quite startled in the spring of 1969. A high ranking senior embassy officer had visited Washington and came back and assembled the entire political section to discuss the situation. He told us that the war was about over, they can't hold out more than a few more months, you can expect peace this year. That was in 1969. That is sort of an extreme

example of how the situation looked different...the realities are hard to define or express in the best of circumstances and you just got farther from reality with the chain I described.

Q: Was this one of these cases which is not unique to Vietnam where you have the more junior officers getting out into the countryside coming back with quite a different picture than those who are of more high rank, and partly because of their position of having to deal with the government, etc.? Did you feel there was kind of a split within the embassy between those who were getting out and reporting one world and those at the top who didn't seem to get the message?

THOMPSON: I think Ambassador Bunker had a pretty realistic view. Generally speaking our reports went into Washington as we wrote them. At one point the head of our unit then, Nick Thorne, would tone down our reports a little bit. When he went on leave and a young tiger took over as acting head, he said he was going to send in all our stuff exactly as we wrote it. So people wrote all these Airgrams telling about how they visited a town and all the Buddhist priests said that Big Minh should be president and Thieu was corrupt and should be out, and so on. All this stuff went into Washington unimpeded for two or three weeks. And, nobody took any notice whatsoever. There was no effect of this presumably franker reporting at all. And, of course, Washington was reading the New York Times and the other news reports coming out so they weren't just relying on the embassy. They realized the embassy probably toned things down a little bit.

You know, the State Department has a system for sending in dissent messages so if an officer has a policy difference he has the right to send that in and it is given high level attention in Washington. So, on one occasion I had written a cable about corruption, I think it was the fact that the general in II Corps was illegally logging cinnamon and selling it which was supposed to be prohibited. He was using army trucks. It was something like that, an everyday occurrence. I had a comment in there that the corruption would probably continue as long as the present military government was in power. This got toned down in the front office. I said, “Well, why don't I send this as a dissent message just representing

my views." Then they went ahead and sent it the way I had written it. That was the only time it ever came up in my case personally. But I think Washington had access to a lot of information besides embassy reporting and I don't think that really made a big difference.

Q: Well, there is a certain amount of inertia, once you start going down a certain course it is pretty hard to change.

THOMPSON: I think the problem in Washington was, as you say, how do you change the policy without creating an even worse situation. A lot of people forget that when we got into Vietnam there were active Communist insurgencies considered dangerous in all the countries of Southeast Asia. We were afraid the Communists were going to take over in the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand. In Indonesia there was an attempted Communist coup in which they came very close to taking over. It is against this background that we were trying to keep the finger in the dike in Vietnam. People looking at the situation later on when we had improved relations with the Soviet Union and China, don't remember that this was a time in which we felt we were competing with the Communist influence all over the world. I mentioned earlier about having an embassy in Niger. We managed to stop them in Korea and we had to do the same thing in Vietnam. So I think people fail to remember that background.

But, once we are in, then it is very hard to disengage and you come up against another of the myths that people were saying after we achieved the peace agreement in 1973, that we could have had the same agreement four years earlier and saved a lot of lives. Well, that is not true at all. In 1969, which I think is the year the Paris Talks started, the Communists were demanding a coalition government. Well, that meant we had to overthrow the government we supported in the south, and everybody agreed that would mean an almost automatic Communist takeover, because that would leave them as the only organized force in the country, and it was not until the negotiations in the fall of 1972 that they agreed not to require that as a precondition for some sort of agreement. So the Communists changed their position and it was only then that our government felt that it

could honorably get out. We could leave and the government we had put in place there and were supporting would still exist. To overthrow that government ourselves would provide problems of credibility and dishonor, I think our leaders felt rightly, around the world. Only after the Communists made the additional concession did the US government feel that we could honorably withdraw. So, following up on your question, how you get out of it even when the world had changed...for example, after the opening to China in 1972, we no longer felt we were opposing China by remaining firm in Vietnam. In fact, the Chinese and the Vietnamese were staunch enemies. So, as the international situation changed, the original interest of having to oppose communism everywhere became greatly diminished as we improved relations with Russia and China, but it is still very hard to withdraw once you are in that deeply. I think our leaders were right feeling we could not do that until the 1972-73 period.

Q: How long were you doing provincial work?

THOMPSON: For 20 months. I came back in October, 1969.

Q: Let's concentrate on that period. What was your impression on how the American military was dealing with the situation in the Delta? You were able to go around and sample opinion and probably had a different view than many. How was this system working in the Delta?

THOMPSON: In the Delta area there were American military as advisors, but not regular units, at least in the provinces I was in. It depended so much on the personality and ability of the individual advisor. In some places we had very good people and in some places I felt they weren't so good. But it was still an advisory position and I think the Vietnamese officials, by and large, had a more fatalistic view. In other words: This war was something that had gone on for a long time and was going to go on a lot longer. The result eventually would be settled by arrangements among the great powers—China and the US and Russia—so whatever they did wasn't very important. The most important thing for them to

do was to survive and perhaps lay up a small fortune for their family and children, because your family is more important to you than anything.

Starting from that basic premise you weren't in a situation where the Vietnamese really wanted to take chances or run risks of getting people killed or even themselves killed or stirring things up too much. So I think you had a pretty passive Vietnamese military and I don't think the American military advisors would make that much difference. Now that's a very broad generalization.

Q: Were we continually uncovering corruption and making noises about it, or were we learning to live with it?

THOMPSON: Well, probably both. I think everybody who had been there for a while realized this was endemic and that a certain percentage of everything you gave would probably be skimmed off one way or another by the local authorities, but there wasn't much you could really do about it and unless it was really blatant you wouldn't complain. There were certain times and places where people did object and probably obtained some improvement if it was exceptionally blatant from a public affairs point of view vis-a-vis the population, beyond the bounds the population would accept, because they would probably accept a certain level as being part of a way of life.

Q: I would guess that the Delta wasn't an area of particular interest to the press who were probably involved elsewhere.

THOMPSON: You are absolutely right. There were relatively few reporters in the Delta, they tended to be more with the American troops or in Saigon.

Q: What was your impression of the media at that time?

THOMPSON: I would not have an impression of the media during that period. As a provincial reporter traveling around the Delta I met reporters rather infrequently. During my

next tour, which we haven't talked about yet, I became better acquainted with a number of them. My first tour, ending in October, 1969, I really didn't meet enough to have an impression.

Q: Okay, Dick, why don't we call it off at this point and we will pick up next time with your second tour which was from December, 1969 until February, 1972.

THOMPSON: Fine.

Q: Today is August 12, 1994. Dick, so we are now in December, 1969. What were you doing after you came back after home leave?

THOMPSON: I might mention that on November 8, 1969 I got married in the National Cathedral in Washington to Kathlee Calhoun Crouch, who is the daughter of the late Edward Crouch. He was a well-known Foreign Service officer in his time who ended up being deputy assistant secretary for budget and finance, testifying on the Hill because he got along well with Congressman John Rooney who virtually ruled the State Department at that time. So I came back to Vietnam with a bride.

Q: Did she come with you at that time?

THOMPSON: Normally wives were not allowed except for members of what was called the Mission Council, a sort of large country team they had there. They wanted me to come back because they were trying to get experienced officers to come back for a second tour. So I said that I would come back if I could bring my wife. So they said, “Okay.” She was one of a relatively few wives.

Q: When you came back, what were you doing?

THOMPSON: I came back to a slightly different position. During my first tour I was what they called a provincial reporter covering 8 provinces in the Delta out of 16. My second tour I was following Vietnamese internal affairs and had special responsibility for the

lower house of the national assembly; certain political parties; a special organ of their government to fight corruption, since that was recognized to be a serious problem; and the supreme court. It was more typical political section work than my first tour.

Q: How did you find contact with the Vietnamese deputies?

THOMPSON: Well, it was very easy. You know, Americans, especially young political officers assigned to Saigon, were really spoiled because the United States represented power to the Vietnamese and whatever faction there might be, and there were a lot of political parties and factions there, they all wanted to have an American connection because that was their way of getting their views to the American embassy. So it was really very easy to do political work, to make contact. In fact, you were being besieged by people really too minor to waste your time on. And the deputies were generally friendly. There were very few who tried to be standoffish towards Americans. They were generally very friendly, as were all the Vietnamese in the government because they recognized that they wouldn't exist if it wasn't for American support.

Q: What role did the Lower House play?

THOMPSON: That is a good question. They had a national assembly with a Lower House and an upper house. I am trying to remember back now, they did pass legislation and often important legislation since they and the government were united in the anti-communist effort. Key pieces of legislation necessary to the war effort that were passed sometimes were changed by the national assembly. There were what were considered opposition deputies who used the assembly as a platform to be consistently critical of the government. There was a very active press in Saigon and about 50 daily newspapers ...maybe 35 Vietnamese language and a dozen Chinese language and a couple of English...representing a fairly wide spectrum of political opinion. There was a pretty free press there. A lot of them were very critical of the government and of the United States presence there, too. They would publish pictures of what were allegedly fetuses

deformed by Agent Orange and things like that. So there was more political life and activity going on than a lot of people might suspect from a distance. You might just think that it was a military government and that was it. But they did have some of the substance of democracy there. They had a constitution and an election in which President Thieu was elected president. Even though behind the scenes the military did retain control through its control of the military apparatus, they permitted quite a significant degree of political activity and freedom.

Q: What about the Supreme Court? Did they play much of a role?

THOMPSON: My memory is, and I am sure scholars have done a better job on this, is that since their constitution did provide for judicial review, as we do in the United States, now and then an issue would be taken to the supreme court which would have some significance and political importance. I remember a time or two I was in a rather embarrassing position of lobbying the supreme court to make a decision one way or another. In retrospect, this would be unthinkable in the United States for a foreign diplomat to be lobbying the US Supreme Court. But these were issues relating to what we thought were important political aspects of what was going on there.

Q: I am always interested in nuts and bolts, how do you lobby a Supreme Court?

THOMPSON: You call on the chief justice or the other justices in their offices and point out the importance of the decision they are about to make, for example, disqualifying a presidential candidate or not disqualifying him, or something. I don't remember the precise issues, but they were things that we felt important to the political health of Vietnam.

Q: You were there from 1969-72, I was there from 1969-70. It was at a much lower level at that time. Was there any change that you saw up through 1972?

THOMPSON: From the military point of view, we had obviously driven the opposition's main force units pretty much back toward the borders by the time the Paris Agreement

was signed. Certainly there was a political structure in place in many areas and the North was just building up waiting for its chance to attack again. But, as you say, the cities were quite tranquil during that period. There was the Tet attack, of course, in early 1968. In the spring of 1969 there was another lesser nation-wide offensive that was very serious in certain locations. And then things were fairly tranquil until the signing of the Paris Agreement in January, 1973.

Q: How about opposition groups? Were the Buddhists a problem anymore?

THOMPSON: That is interesting. They had been so important before I got there with the immolations, etc., which is the period of our willingness to go along with the overthrow of Diem. Although we had somebody who is our most fluent Vietnamese speaker...

Q: Who was that?

THOMPSON: Harold Colebaugh, who left the Foreign Service some years ago. His career was relatively brief, but he was a very talented linguist. But when I was there I don't recall that the Buddhist political parties really had a leading political role. Some parties had more Buddhist support than others. But the Buddhists as such, as I recall, were in a somewhat secondary role.

Q: Were you limited in your contact with the Vietnamese military? I am thinking of the embassy. Or did we leave that more to our military?

THOMPSON: Well, we had a couple of Foreign Service officers in the embassy who were supposed to follow political/military affairs. I know they saw generals from time to time, but I would be reluctant to try to describe in detail the extent to which we were in touch with the senior officers. Of course, Ambassador Bunker kept in personal touch with the top military leaders. After a while the prime minister was also a general. I think when I arrived the position was held by a civilian and for some reason that didn't work out and so a general was made prime minister. Ambassador Bunker certainly kept in touch with that

top level. He was constantly having people to dinner and doing an excellent job of keeping in touch.

Q: This was probably the largest political section we have had anywhere. How did you find the political section, particularly this latter half of your time there? There were a lot of people running around, lots of contact, but how effective were they?

THOMPSON: Washington wanted to know in detail what was going on in Vietnam and it was a vitally important issue for the United States then. So I think the political section was certainly needed. For example, the provincial reporters, the unit of about eight people who went around the country, plus a chief, that would be nine people all together and that was part of the political section, gave the civilian part of the embassy and, I think, Washington tremendous insights into what was going on around the country. There was the CORDS system which was ultimately considered under military command but with a civilian deputy. You had people out in the country working on reconstruction and helping the local forces fight at the same time. There was reporting going back through their channels also. But it often didn't reach Washington as fully as our reporting, and it tended to be spotty in some provinces. In some locations you would have some bright young fellow with Vietnamese who would really turn in some interesting information, and in other places you didn't. So I think the embassy reporting really pulled it together for Washington. I think I counted 25 or 26 people in our political section at one time. For an important country I didn't think that was too many.

Q: Let's talk about corruption. How did you see corruption? For many looking at this from a distance, it seemed that the Vietnamese government was sort of fatally flawed because of the corruption angle.

THOMPSON: World wide the idea of taking care of your family first and then your village and clan, etc. is rather strong as opposed to our idea of a government. A certain degree of government taking a rake-off is expected by everyone and accepted, but it was excessive

in many cases. This was obviously a great weakness of the Vietnamese government that we were supporting. Some people were considered excessively corrupt and grasping and greedy and that weakened us in competition with the Communists who, of course, although they had their people on the take, by and large were rather honest and ascetic as symbolized by “Uncle Ho” who apparently lived a very simply life. It was almost monastic, as I recall. That was a very serious problem, weakening popular support for the government.

Q: Did you see any serious effort to try to do something about it?

THOMPSON: Not really. There was an organ set up by the constitution to fight corruption, I forget the name of it now, but it just couldn't be effective because the main people being corrupt were the military leaders who really ran things. So there wasn't much that they could do.

Q: Were you ever involved in saying, “I hear general so-and-so of the II Corps is taking a rake off here and there” and reporting it and that sort of thing?

THOMPSON: That was done especially at the provincial level where we had a province senior advisor, who I think would be telling his province chief that he had better curb this or that. I don't recall much being said about this at the national level. It may have been, but I don't recall any such demarches.

Q: When you arrived there the second time...you basically left during the Johnson Administration and came back in the Nixon Administration....did you note any change in demands on the political section such as more candor, less candor, more complete, less complete?

THOMPSON: I am trying to remember. As I recall, Ambassador Bunker was kept on straight through. I didn't really notice any changes from one administration to another. What was sort of interesting was that the Communists were very clearly trying to exploit

every presidential election. In 1968 it was the Tet attack and then in 1972 it was more on the negotiations scene that they were trying to use the American presidential election to weaken our political will. They were really combining military strategy with political tactics in a very skillful way.

Q: In the second period, before we move on to the Paris Peace Mission, were there any major developments in Vietnam that you were involved with?

THOMPSON: I might say two things. In the first place, there were a lot of functioning democratic institutions and the people were used to it and politicians got used to it, and I think there was a lot of progress in making democracy a reality among the political elite of the country. In 1971, as I recall, there was a presidential election and that turned out to be a one man election. There were various ways you could be nominated to be president. You had to be nominated by a certain number of deputies and senators or by a certain number of the provincial councilors. President Thieu had been telling Ambassador Bunker that there undoubtedly would be several candidates. Then suddenly, close to the deadline for qualifying people, Bunker discovered that President Thieu had pressured almost all of the provincial councilors to sign up for him. In fact, there were very few that hadn't signed up for him and would be available to sign up for somebody else. Ambassador Bunker felt that Thieu had really lied to him on this one and was furious about it. As I recall, somehow Nguyen Cao Ky, who was a well-known figure had got enough to be nominated, but I think then he withdrew. Either he didn't get enough or he withdrew, I forget which, so he was suddenly out of the picture and Big Minh, a leading general but a critic of the Thieu government, was the only hope to be an opposition candidate. I think there were enough Lower House. He had quite a bit of support among Lower House deputies. I think he had enough or would have had enough signatories from deputies to run, but he said it was obvious that it was going to be a fixed election and he wouldn't run. There was a famous meeting when Bunker came back from Washington and called on Big Minh. Big Minh said afterwards that Bunker had offered him one or three million dollars (I can't remember the exact amount) if he would run, the idea being that the US wanted it to be a real election

with two candidates, at least in appearance. I went with Bunker to that meeting but at a certain point I was asked to step outside so I don't know exactly what went on between them. I think probably what really happened was that Ambassador Bunker offered financial help to Big Minh's campaign or at least it was in that form and Big Minh turned it down because he said he knew it was clear, even though we were offering money, we still wanted Thieu to win. Thieu was the US candidate but we wanted Big Minh to run to make the election look good and he wasn't going to do that. So, he didn't run and the election in the end was uncontested, which was certainly a setback. But, overall, I think if there hadn't been a Communist threat they might actually have become a democratic society.

Q: You left there in December 1971, is that right?

THOMPSON: Yes, that would have been a two-year tour. I got there in December, 1969 and probably left December, 1971 or January, 1972.

Q: I might just note for the record that you got the Superior Honor Award for your work there. Was this for just sustained work or was it for any particular action?

THOMPSON: I am very grateful to John Sylvester who wrote it up and pushed it through. He wrote it up that I had done excellent reporting, sometimes in physical danger, which was certainly true from time to time.

Q: This goes back to your provincial reporting?

THOMPSON: I guess it would have been the first time, although he was actually my boss during my second tour. I guess he must have gone back into my provincial days when writing this up. On one occasion, for example, I was sitting at the airport in Can Tho, the capital of the Delta region, in a small plane waiting to take off, when mortar rounds started coming in on the airport. The pilot had to sit warming up his engines while the mortar rounds came in and then he took off. Or you would be flying along in a chopper and land at some small town and be told that the VC had fired at the chopper from a nearby tree

line. Of course you couldn't hear it while in the chopper because of the noise. I guess there are incidents like this in the life of everyone there. I think it was given for a combination of excellent reporting and some danger.

Q: When you left there in 1972, whither Vietnam in your opinion at that time?

THOMPSON: Well, I think we all felt that Vietnam would be dependent on strong American support in view of the tenacity of the North. The only way the South could survive would be through continuing American support. You could see that such support was gradually slipping away over the years. So, I think our long-term prognosis was pretty poor, even though by 1972-73, there was an appearance of tranquility. There was a major communist offensive in the spring of 1972, but thereafter the enemy's main force units had been pushed back into remote areas around the borders and economic development was proceeding very rapidly. Their exports were going up very quickly. Rice production was booming. There were fish farms. The country had had virtually no exports for a number of years and their imports were covered by US assistance, but their exports were now zooming up. There were signs that they could have a viable economy. But this was all kind of a false picture of prosperity in view of the constant threat of the North renewing the offensive.

Q: What was your next assignment?

THOMPSON: After my second tour in Vietnam I was assigned to the Paris Peace Talks. But before we move on to Paris I should note Kathleen and I had two children born at the U.S. Army Third Field Hospital on the edge of Saigon. John Edward Thompson born August 29, 1970, and Francesca Cloud Thompson born September 1, 1971.

Q: Okay. You were in Paris from 1972-74. When you arrived, what was the status?

THOMPSON: Well, they were a kind of ritual that had been going on for at least a couple of years. There had been all that discussion about the shape of the table, but by the time

I got there that had been settled. Of course, those sorts of issues are very important because they are symbolic. One side maintained that they were four-sided talks, and the other side maintained they were two-sided talks. So you had all these seemingly trivial issues like the shape of the table and the arrangements, etc., which really were symbolic of who was actually going to prevail and impose his view on the other side. They went to the heart of how the war would come out.

By the time I got there there were these talks in the Conference Center in the Avenue Kleber. They were very ritualized with the exchanging of statements around a large table, then you had lunch, and then would come back for some rebuttals. There were four delegations for North Vietnam, the United States, The Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government, which was the puppet government that Hanoi had set up purporting to represent the South. Of course, the famous Madame Binh was the head of that delegation. You would come into the room and the first few minutes are kind of exciting to be sitting there with the North Vietnamese and Madame Binh. And then the speeches drone on and it becomes less exciting, especially as every speech had to be given in three languages. The procedures were set up that the Vietnamese would speak in Vietnamese, it would be translated into French and then into English. There was simultaneous translating so you could hear all three at the same time, but it still meant that every statement was made three times so everything was really dragged out.

Q: What were you doing?

THOMPSON: I was liaison officer in our delegation. This meant that I was the person authorized to talk to the other delegations to set up meetings, sometimes to exchange documents, and at times visit their headquarters to exchange documents or procedural proposals or something. If you stop and think this makes a lot of sense because you need to have a designated person as a contact point for the delegations. If someone else from the delegation called them they should ignore him or her. You could imagine a delegation with 12 or 15 people if anybody felt he could phone somebody from another delegation

and start setting up meetings or passing papers, etc. You needed to have a definite point of contact for that sort of thing.

I did some of the reporting on the meetings and there was always a press conference right afterwards in the same location where the four delegations would take turns speaking to the press. I would do a reporting cable of what was said at the press conference. At the actual meetings, part of the arrangements was a big circular table and a small rectangular table on each side which sort of divided the big table into two sides. That was part of the proceedings. I sat at a small table and opposite me on the other side was the North Vietnamese liaison officer. His English, of course, was much better than my Vietnamese. When somebody started a speech we would exchange the text because they were all written out ahead of time to help your translators know what to say. So, he and I did certain things relating to our duties as liaison officers even during the meetings.

The whole point of these lengthy meetings was to make them last until lunch because the French would give a good lunch. Apparently in the early days, it had been a nice hot lunch, but as the years went on, it started becoming a cold lunch, but it was still very tasty. So, the object was to make sure you could go on long enough to get lunch. And then you would come back for a round of pro forma rebuttals and then go home.

Of course, behind the scenes, as revealed later, Kissinger was carrying on his secret talks. Now and then, in hindsight, there was a faint reflection of those in what went on in these more or less public talks.

Q: Who was leading our delegation?

THOMPSON: When I arrived, it was William Porter, who was a very respected career officer and who thereafter became briefly number three man in the State Department, Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and then I forget if he retired or left with the change in administration or what. Anyway he held that job for a relatively short time. A very nice person. Very realistic. One of the relatively few high-ranking people I heard that always

spoke honestly and made sense. He was in the Phil Habib mold who always spoke directly and frankly and realistically. His assistant was Heyward Isham, another career officer who retired not long thereafter.

The next important development was in October, 1972 when Kissinger revealed the secret talks.

Q: What did that do to what you all were doing?

THOMPSON: It meant the suspension of the talks around the round table at Avenue Kleber and a couple of us were then taken from the regular delegation and brought into the Kissinger talks. I was brought in as a second interpreter. He had a very gifted interpreter, David Engel, who really spoke fluent Vietnamese.

Q: Where did he learn Vietnamese?

THOMPSON: Well, I think in the system. He was at the Foreign Service Institute and just a very gifted person.

I was pulled in to the delegation as sort of an additional flunkey to attend meetings. I don't remember exactly what happened, but basically what happened secretly was that the North had started to pull back from positions it had been taking before and that was when Kissinger revealed the secret talks in October. I attended one or two meetings then at houses in Neuilly, a suburb of Paris where we met with the North and they in effect were confirming that they were pulling back from previously agreed positions. There was one last meeting in early December at which Hey Isham was head of our delegation, all the top people having left already. Hey Isham and I went out to a Communist-sponsored meeting place on the outskirts of Paris and just ran down the list of issues and confirmed that they had pulled back on everything. This set the stage for the famous Christmas bombing of Hanoi, after the election.

Q: You say that they pulled back from previously agreed positions, these are ones that both sides had agreed to?

THOMPSON: Yes, in the secret talks.

Q: And then all of a sudden they just stopped?

THOMPSON: I can't remember. I am talking from memory. I am sure Kissinger has written about this.

Q: Were both sides looking over their shoulders at the battlefield at that time?

THOMPSON: No, they were looking over the shoulders of the American presidential election. And I suppose the reason they pulled back was because they saw that Nixon was going to win and they were not succeeding to influence the election by their maneuverings in the secret talks. The last meeting we held with them was after the election, I recall, in December, and they were still recalcitrant so we had the famous Christmas bombing.

There were two military officers attached to our delegation. During most of the time it was a general and a colonel, but towards the end it was a colonel and a lieutenant colonel. They had the best intelligence coming in from around the world to our delegation. During the Christmas bombing the North started shooting down B52s, the first time any were shot down. I can't remember how many were downed but from our intelligence we also knew they were running out of missiles so they would soon be totally helpless in the face of our bombing. Under the influence of this bombing, which I think was intended to be close to Hanoi, somehow stray bombs not only strike the French embassy, but killed the ambassador's mistress, which is very unkind indeed. So, in early January they agreed to resume the talks, the secret talks which by then were not very secret because hordes of newsmen would follow Kissinger wherever he went.

Q: Did you attend these meetings?

THOMPSON: Yes. Some meetings were between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, and I would be there. As they started to make progress, they broke into two levels and Kissinger and Le Duc Tho would be working out the general agreement and Ambassador William Sullivan would be meeting with a deputy foreign minister, Nguyen Co Thach, who later became foreign minister. Bill Sullivan and Thach would be working out the protocols which were the details of application, how you set up inspection teams, etc. in a separate set of meetings. So there were two sets of meetings going on. The principals, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho might be meeting in one place and Sullivan and Thach in another meeting place. So I was the interpreter for the Sullivan/Thach meetings and David Engel would stay with Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. Now and then I would be in one of the principal meetings. Maybe they would have to meet and talk to set some guidance for the secondary meetings and then the secondary meetings would resume.

Q: How did Kissinger and Le Duc Tho conduct their meetings?

THOMPSON: When the meetings first resumed in January, they were very frosty. The media, of course, didn't have much to go on but they set up cameras on raised towers 20 feet high so they could focus down inside the walls and see what happened between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. Kissinger would arrive and knock on the door and somebody would let him in. Then after some days Le Duc Tho would come out and greet him on the doorstep and guide him in, and then he would shake hands on the doorstep and guide him in. So the newsmen judged by this how warm the talks were getting. As they started to make progress, at first you would have lunch separately. Then they started having lunch together making it a social occasion between the two delegations. And then Kissinger and Le Duc Tho would sit together and chat during the lunches. So the atmosphere gradually grew warmer as we made progress toward an agreement. By the time we got to the point where they were sitting together they were chatting together almost like old friends. You could tell that they were both very intelligent men, very dedicated to the interests of their

respective countries and that there obviously was continuing reserve and carefulness even as they were seemingly chatting in a social way.

Q: Before going to a meeting, what would you and the support people on the delegation do? Would you sit around and try to figure out what you were trying to get from that particular meeting?

THOMPSON: I was not a substantive factor in this. Kissinger certainly would sit around and talk with Bill Sullivan; George Aldrich, his legal advisor who had been working on the negotiations for years; Bill Stearman, who I think is now on the faculty here at Georgetown and who was there with the NSC, about what they were going to get out of these meetings. I was not involved in that.

Q: You had been in Vietnam for a long time, did you find yourself being asked how such and such played with the Vietnamese, etc.?

THOMPSON: No, Kissinger and his substantive assistants had been dealing with the Vietnamese in these negotiations for several years and there wasn't anything a political officer from Saigon could add. They had been gauging and judging these people at the level they worked for years.

Q: At this point we essentially bypass the South Vietnamese and the Viet Cong?

THOMPSON: That is very true. Of course, the PRG was only a puppet anyway, although Madame Binh tried to pretend she had a more serious role from time to time. We immediately briefed the South Vietnamese after every meeting. Kissinger usually sent Bill Sullivan to do that. Whether he told them everything or not I don't know. You will recall that at one point the issue arose that the negotiators had been working with English language documents and there was also a Vietnamese translation. We gave the South Vietnamese the Vietnamese version of the document and they said, “Well, look, in Vietnamese this says very different things than it says in English.” We went back to the North and got

some changes in the Vietnamese language to correspond more closely with the English. But they were somewhat shunted aside. I can't remember the exact sequence of the meetings, but I recall at one point when the agreement had been virtually finalized and we were preparing for a very formal international conference because there was sort of a guarantee statement that would be signed by China and the Soviet Union, as well as the four countries involved. There was an international conference with the foreign ministers of all the great powers for the first time in many years after World War II. They all came together in Paris to sign the document guaranteeing and recognizing the agreement on Vietnam. While the preparations were being made for this, suddenly Madame Binh called for a meeting around the old round table again. I remember I was meeting with Ambassador Sullivan and Thach in another room in the conference center to work out some final procedures for the formal signing while she had called this meeting. I can't remember what she was talking about, but anyway, our meeting finished and we came in to the other meeting and Thach was resuming his chair as head of the North Vietnamese delegation. Thach, the deputy foreign minister, walked behind Madame Binh who was talking to the group and stopped and made a choking gesture behind her where she couldn't see him and everybody else in the room laughed and he went on and sat down. This, I think, was pretty symbolic of how the North Vietnamese regarded the Provisional Revolutionary Government. They were nonplused when she called the meeting because this was not following orders.

Q: During this time did you form any relationship with your North Vietnamese counterpart, or were things still chilly at your level?

THOMPSON: Since we met together and chatted during the luncheons, of course, and I had my counterpart close to me at the general talks, so we chatted a bit about our families and other things, I felt there was a certain degree of personal relationship. At the secondary meetings between Sullivan and Thach working out the protocols, again you had the regular meeting at a table, which might be the dining room table in a house in a suburb, but then you would adjourn for tea after a while and Thach spoke pretty good

English, although Sullivan and he could talk in French too, and they would sit off to one side and probably work on some of the details. Tea breaks are very important in diplomacy as you know and that was certainly true of these.

Q: Did you stay until the end of the whole process?

THOMPSON: Well, even beyond in a sense. I am trying to remember when the Paris Agreements on Vietnam were signed. It was in late January, 1973. At any rate, once the agreements were worked out and initialed all the foreign ministers came together and had a big signing and cocktail party in this conference center at which the Foreign Minister of South Vietnam and Madame Binh clinked glasses and toasted peace...I remember at the same party I ran into a Soviet diplomat who had been posted five years in Hanoi and we talked for a half hour in Vietnamese, that was our common language. That was kind of fun.

One of the things that was set up by the Paris Agreements on Vietnam, was a joint economic commission between North Vietnam and the United States because we had undertaken a commitment in the agreement to bind up the wounds of war, which meant to give the whole of Indochina additional help. There was a secret promise, under Johnson, that was originally proposed to North Vietnam that they would get a considerable amount of assistance and this was confirmed in an exchange of correspondence between the prime minister of North Vietnam and Nixon that they would get, as I recall, $3.25 billion over five years. The Agreements also set up a joint economic commission. So I stayed on in Paris as one of two delegation members who were kept on—the other one was Bill Marsh, now US Representative to the FAO in Rome—to staff this new delegation. New people came out from Washington to be substantive members of this delegation headed by Maurice Williams, then deputy administrator of AID, who is a very able man. On our delegation, only Maury Williams and I knew that Nixon had promised $3.25 billion over a period of five years if the North Vietnamese would be good. This was a secret for several years. It finally became public a few years later.

So these meetings started taking place at two levels. There would be meetings between heads of delegation in which key issues were discussed. Of course, the North wanted us to hand them a check for $650 million every year and they would know how to spend it. We were saying that they had to have projects and sign agreements for each project and have the full AID detailed treatment of each project. The North was saying that that was ridiculous, etc. So, we worked out a set of principles which would guide the US assistance. In our general meetings with everybody from both delegations present we would be discussing our assistance on the basis of specific needs they had, the commodity import program, a statement of principles to guide the US assistance to North Vietnam (their principle would be hand over a check and ours would be all the usual oversight safeguards of an AID program). But after two or three months it was clear that they weren't abiding by the agreement. They were preparing for future war, so we broke off the talks.

In June, 1973, there was something called the June Communiqu#. Things were breaking down so seriously that Kissinger and Le Duc Tho came back to Paris and had some additional talks and came out with a communiqu# which to some degree modified the Paris Agreements and described how both sides would implement them. This joint economic commission came back and met again briefly, as I recall, in June and July. But the North was not observing various parts of the agreement from our point of view and we adjourned those talks and never met again. I think the world has not really noticed that that joint economic commission ever existed, ever met, but we were, of course, holding out carrots to the North Vietnamese to observe the Paris Agreements, which would have preserved an independent South Vietnam.

Q: When the Paris Accords were signed in 1973, how did you feel? What did you think?

THOMPSON: We felt that the North would probably take over the South in the near future. We were withdrawing our support from the South. Kissinger observed it, and the rest of us, that the South could not stand up and prevail since US support was gone, and Congress had passed a law forbidding any further bombing of Hanoi. These agreements would

give us a chance to pull out our troops and make an honorable retreat. There was a lot of talk that Nixon could have had the same agreement four years earlier, but that is not true because the North had been insisting that we set up a coalition government with the current government, neutralists and communists in Saigon even before they would let us withdraw, which was absolutely intolerable. It was only in the negotiations of 1972 that they started to say, “Okay, you don't have to overthrow this government before you leave.” So the South Vietnamese government which was our client stayed in place, we withdrew our troops, got our POWs back and were able to withdraw the American forces in some sort of order from Indochina, and that was about the most we could hope for really. We left with the government we supported still in place and with some perhaps small fighting chance to maintain itself, but we weren't very optimistic. So I think we all felt we had gotten what we could out of it and managed to negotiate a more or less honorable US withdrawal from this commitment to Southeast Asia, which obviously was not supported any longer by the American people.

Q: By the time the Peace Accords were signed were you watching Congressional actions as far as support for the war went?

THOMPSON: Yes, that was very clear. Even the hawks were giving up. Of course, then the fighting was resumed, there was the offensive in 1975 and there was a very key vote, and I can't remember how much the money was, perhaps $300 million, on assistance to the South. By then even the hawks were saying that there was no sense throwing good money after bad, so even the hawks were not willing to vote money for Vietnam by 1975. You could see that trend developing already.

Q: When did you leave Paris after these economic talks had broken down?

THOMPSON: After these talks adjourned in July, Marsh and I were left there in charge of the delegation.

Q: This was in 1973?

THOMPSON: Yes. These talks had adjourned but in theory they could resume. Our delegation's quarters were very splendiferous because these quarters were a section of the American embassy in Paris which had been organized to house the US ambassador to NATO and his assistant. So they were very nice offices in Building B, as it was called, adjoining our embassy in Paris. It was just Bill and me in two very impressive large offices with large anterooms and a whole series of smaller rooms for other members of the delegation, etc. So we were kept on there I guess almost indefinitely. Finally after a while I said to the Department of State, “There is nothing happening here, will you reassign me?” But by then my two years were almost up and they said, “Fine, we will do it.” Ambassador Graham Martin asked me to come back to Saigon to be head of the external affairs unit in the political section. I left Paris I believe in February, 1974 and I arrived in Saigon in late February or March after some home leave in the States.

Q: We are talking about February 1974, what was the situation then in Vietnam?

THOMPSON: The internal situation, as I recall it, was relatively peaceful. There wasn't fighting, the Republic of Vietnam seemed to have extended its sway over most of the population of the South. The economy was improving, as I was saying before there was some international aid coming in in addition to American assistance and you started to think that maybe this country was going to survive after all. Although you knew that the North was strong and wouldn't give up, at that time they were obviously lying low. I was chief of the external affairs unit in the political section, which was very different from my earlier two tours. Now I was following Vietnam's relations with the world and my main local client was the Foreign Ministry. The main thing I was doing was trying to keep the PRG from being accepted in international organizations. Bureaucratically it was kind of fun. Usually we would get an intelligence report indicating that the PRG was about to open an office in Geneva or something of that sort to represent the PRG in the UN organizations based in Geneva. Then we would send cables all over the world saying that

this is an awful thing and recommending approaches be made by Washington to a bunch of countries to stop this. Washington would get out a cable saying “Okay, proceed as recommended by embassy Saigon in para 3 reftel,” or something like that. In Washington they were sort of paralyzed, nobody wanted to do anything and take the lead, but Graham Martin's orders were to try to preserve South Vietnam if he could and by God he was going to try to do it. I even got some phone calls from Washington saying that people didn't like these cables from Saigon going all over the world. I said, “Well, we are just doing our job. You guys are paralyzed back there, and this is what we are supposed to do.”

Q: Why would they be paralyzed?

THOMPSON: Well, there was no interest in Vietnam anymore and they would rather not think about it. I think it was just harder to get higher-ups who were going on to other problems to worry about keeping the PRG out of international organizations. So we were really taking the lead on that and that was kind of fun.

The other main function my section had was watching Hanoi. I had a State Department officer, David Walker, who had been doing this for years, and he would look at all the intelligence reports we were getting plus looking very carefully at the public broadcasts from Hanoi from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service and doing analysis of what was going on.

Also nominally in my section was Frank Snepp, who later wrote a book, “Decent Interval” on the fall of Saigon, which was interesting reading. Frank Snepp was also involved in analyzing what Hanoi was up to. The external unit had the main function of watching Hanoi and keeping the PRG out of international organizations, dealing mainly with the Foreign Ministry.

There developed another fun function at that time. Congressman Leo Ryan of California, a moderate Democrat, came to Saigon and I was named his escort officer. When he arrived in Saigon he was put in the guest quarters next to the ambassador's house and

the ambassador came over [this is Graham Martin at this point] and the Congressman was very grumpy to him. I think he was mad at the State Department about something that didn't have anything to do with Saigon, as I recall. He also had a cold from the trip and was tired. He was pretty short with poor Ambassador Martin. I accompanied him on a trip around the country and I always enjoyed these trips because you get a lot of chopper rides and small plane rides and get a good look at the countryside and get to talk with a number of interesting people. Congressman Ryan went back to the United States and issued a report supporting continued aid to Vietnam. Well, Ambassador Martin thought that somehow I had something to do with this favorable result so he made me the control officer for all VIP visitors to Saigon. So I spent a lot of my time flying around Vietnam escorting people, which was great fun. One group was especially outstanding, Congressman Pete McCloskey, who is a liberal Republican, and Senator Dewey Bartlett. The two of them came together. Bartlett later died of cancer and McCloskey ran against Nixon in 1972 in the Republican primaries so there would be some alternative to Nixon. McCloskey had been in Vietnam before and had a loose leaf notebook with the notes from his previous trip. Every time he was talking to a Corps commander he would hear what he had to say and then respond, “In 1972 you said the same thing, has nothing changed?” He was really interesting to travel with. So, the third function was escorting VIPs around the country which I enjoyed very much.

Q: How did you find Graham Martin? He became very controversial because of his hanging on until the very end.

THOMPSON: I was in a rather special position with Graham Martin because Eddie Crouch, my wife's father, had been a very good friend of Graham Martin. My mother-in-law, Kitty Crouch, was a very good friend of Dotty, Graham Martin's wife, and still is for that matter to this day. So I was to a certain extent persona grata with him. He brought in a group of personal friends who had served with him at other posts to fill various key positions in Saigon and this group would give parties for each other and I was included because of my wife. We would go over to his house and watch movies with him and his

family. Often his daughter, Janet, was there... I don't know if you have read the book, “The Last Ambassador” by the Kalb brothers. It is a novel based on the fall of Saigon which includes the daughter of the U.S. ambassador there at that time and that character was modeled on Janet Martin who spent a considerable amount of time in Saigon. She was one of my wife's best friends, so I had a personal relationship with the Martin family. I respect him a great deal for his personal integrity. I think he did not reach out like Ambassador Bunker did, he would read reports from everywhere but he didn't personally talk to Vietnamese very much except when he had to make a formal demarche, as I recall. He was an insomniac so at 2:00 in the morning he would be writing reports and cables on yellow legal pads on new ways that we might outflank the North and win after all. I can't add a great deal to the picture. But he is definitely a man who had his own quirks and his own blind spots, even though he was also a very able man and had been ambassador to at least Italy and Thailand before that and been very highly regarded. He did his best to preserve South Vietnam and that was really something impossible to do.

Q: What was the prevailing feeling in the political section—that there would be an eventual Northern attack which would prevail?

THOMPSON: Yes. But that was somewhat in the back of your mind because superficially things seemed to be going very well. Then suddenly, I think it was February, 1975, there was an attack on Ban Me Thuot, the capital of one of the highland provinces not all that far north of Saigon. As I recall, there were elements of three divisions involved in this attack and we hadn't known they were there. Previously by listening to radio communications we had had pretty good intelligence on where the major North Vietnamese units were. They had figured out we knew where they were from their radios, so they had run tremendous long landlines or used couriers, etc. and managed to move in the jungle without our knowing where they were. So suddenly we had an attack not very far from Saigon by elements of three divisions. At that point most people thought this was the beginning of the end. The estimates by various agencies of how long Saigon would last varied from something like six weeks to six months. But once the North renewed the attack people

started getting pretty pessimistic. It was not long thereafter that there was an attack in the north. The South had to keep divisions throughout the country making it easier for the North to roll up the country by concentrating its forces in one area at a time, moving southward. There was a plan to try to defend the Delta region at some point, but by then the Southern troops were crumbling and they couldn't form a defensive line anywhere. So once the end began it came rather quickly. More quickly then the North expected too. Usually they planned everything for months and worked everything out on sand tables, but they did not expect to win that quickly. They did not have plans in place to govern Saigon and the South, for example, but they made the decision once they saw how weak the South was to go ahead and win that year. Of course, that was my calculation too, when I agreed to go back to Saigon. I bought a house in 1974 when I was in Washington on home leave. I thought that I could probably finish a two-year tour in Vietnam before the North would win. We received extra pay for serving in Vietnam which would enable me to repay my parents for the down payment on the house. In the end it was only one year to the surprise of both the North Vietnamese and myself.

Q: You left when?

THOMPSON: I left—I am confused whether it was April 29 or April 30, because it was one date in the US and another date in Saigon—but the day of the fall of Saigon, I left by chopper from the embassy roof, about 9:00 PM. There was a very dramatic period leading up to that.

Q: Please talk about it. I think it is very important to get a feel for the embassy and the political section and how you felt. For those of us sitting back in Washington, when you saw Da Nang go down and those dramatic pictures of people being pushed out of planes, etc. you knew it was over. But the embassy kept functioning. What were you all thinking?

THOMPSON: By and large the same thing. It was only a matter of time. There were just differences of opinion as to how quickly the end would come. At a certain point about the

beginning of April they started permitting families to be sent out to a safe haven. I think I sparked that. I should be somewhat modest, but I suggested to the Deputy Ambassador, Wolf Lehmann, that it might be a good idea to start getting families out. My family went to Bangkok, but the Thais said that they did not want all these people so we had to send the rest somewhere else. When I went back to Vietnam with my wife in 1969 families were generally not allowed, but it gradually became easier and easier as the situation improved and a lot of families including children were in Saigon by 1975. I sent my family out about four weeks ahead, around April 1. By this time we had three children: Alexander Sackett Thompson had been born October 21, 1972 at the American Hospital in Neuilly, a suburb of Paris. Kathleen was much more comfortable there than at the military hospital outside of Saigon.

Getting back to the last days of Saigon, there were scary stories, especially the CIA people started saying that if they left for a weekend the local Vietnamese working with them started thinking that this must be the end. I went for a weekend to Thailand to visit my family and came back and my maids were tremendously relieved to find that I had in fact returned. As the fighting got closer and closer politically an interesting situation developed. The Paris Agreement on Vietnam set up an international commission to watch over the withdrawal arrangements and these people were still there. There was a Polish delegation and a Hungarian delegation and Tom Polgar, the CIA chief of station in Saigon was of Hungarian descent, and he felt he was getting good information from the Hungarian delegation indicating that the North was going to stop short of taking over Saigon and force the formation of a coalition government. You could see a lot of reasons the North might do this. It would give them international legitimacy, they would be eligible for international loans and assistance, on the surface they would be abiding by the agreements on Vietnam which called for a coalition to be established, and creating a very stable situation. So you can imagine that there might be reasons for the North Vietnamese to stop short of Saigon. On the other hand, Frank Snepp indicated in his book that he had a good strategic source who was telling him that the North was simply going to take over Saigon.

So this affected me personally in the sense that...there was the night of the 28th when I was awakened at 3:00 in the morning because Tan Son Nhut airport, on the outskirts of Saigon, and three miles from where I lived, was being shelled. When I went in to the embassy that morning I didn't know if I was going in to accompany the ambassador, who still thought there would be negotiations locally on some sort of coalition, so I wore my best summer suit ...if I was going to be evacuated I might as well take it out with me, or I might need it to accompany the ambassador to negotiations. So, either way I wanted to wear my best suit. I also had a very small bag that had just the key things in it you would need if you were going to be evacuated...towel, soap, toilet kit, change of clothing, etc. So I took my evacuation bag into the embassy and learned that evacuation was indeed in the cards.

Now, as far as evacuation was concerned my role was to be in touch with several other embassies. We had drawn down personnel in the American embassy, my secretary had left some time before and I had had several substitute secretaries and then they left. But certain people who had a role in the final evacuation were kept on. My role was to get in touch with certain other embassies and tell them, “We are leaving, if you want to leave with us do this.” The last few days all four lines of my telephone had been constantly lit. I couldn't begin to take all the telephone calls I was getting and it was very hard to get a line out. I was afraid that on the final day I would not be able to get in touch with these embassies by phone and I would have to physically go around to them. In the end, however, I got through to them very quickly and my actual duties were done. So I helped other people do things like shredding documents. Some people had not shredded documents, for example the ambassador had not shredded his documents and he had file cabinet after file cabinet that had to be shredded that last day. I had about this much left.

Q: You are showing about six inches.

THOMPSON: Yes. I tossed them in the shredder and was ready to go. I also took my telephone list, containing Vietnamese contacts, etc. and shredded that. I didn't want to

leave anything that would show them who my friends were. So then I helped other people shred and organized various things that last day.

At one point my maid telephoned me to say that the guard at the gate had left my house and she was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I said to take the TV and anything else she wanted and to clear out because we were evacuating and I wouldn't see her again. She was crying, I was crying. The Vietnamese language is very hard to speak at best but I found it very hard to speak while crying. Then my faithful chauffeur came around. I had inherited him from my predecessor. I gave him several months salary for him and all the others in several envelopes in Vietnamese currency, which I hope he was at least able to get to the one at the house. I was able to pass the envelopes through a locked gate. Somebody told me that a few months later they had seen my car, which was very distinctive, a yellow Volkswagen squareback with a shiny silver knob on the shift lever being driven around Saigon. So, some Vietnamese Communist official presumably got that.

I got to the embassy at the usual time, around 9:00 am and parked the car across the street and never got back to my car again. The embassy was soon surrounded by Vietnamese wanting to get out. There were already several thousand inside the embassy compound, because during the night certain Americans had been bringing their friends in.

I am really getting ahead of the story because for several weeks there had been a degree of evacuation going on of South Vietnamese who might be in difficulty if the North Vietnamese won. There was a lot of controversy at higher levels about evacuation with the military authorities wanting to start evacuation fairly early on and the ambassador resisting this as I understand from the stories at that time. You have the famous story of Lionel Rosenblatt and Craig Johnstone, two Foreign Service officers stationed in Washington, coming back to Saigon to help their friends escape during the final weeks. I was keeping a tally of how many people there were at the embassies we were responsible for that we might have to get out on the final day and other people were keeping a tally of the number

of Americans that might have to be evacuated the last day. In the end, no American who wanted to evacuate, as far as we know, was left behind. But the number of Americans actually went up on some days rather than going down. This infuriated the ambassador because he thought it would be coming down.. But people were coming back to get their Vietnamese friends or their loved ones out.

We started helping Vietnamese who would be in danger leave the country and at some point the ambassador gave this his blessing, I don't know when. When I came down to breakfast each morning I would find several Vietnamese there who wanted me to help them get out. I would apologize for eating while I talked with them. I would eat breakfast and they would give me pieces of paper, listing their family members, how they could be contacted and stating why they were in danger. Upon arriving at the embassy I would write a cover memo for each of these and put them in the in-box of Shep Lowman, the head of the unit in the political section dealing with Vietnamese internal politics. The members of this unit were going around at night and picking up the Vietnamese, or telephoning and telling them to be at a certain place with their family members and suitcases, and taking them out to the airport. So I put these papers in his in-box and he would decide which ones were worthy to be taken out under our program. He conducted the actual evacuations but I would receive all these petitions from these people and put them into our system. I was very touched when one Vietnamese friend said that if I didn't get out he had a friend who would help me to get out—he was an importer who had a lot of boats and when the final day came he would get on his boat and sail away. Later I learned the Vietnamese friend who offered to help me did get out and it turned out that his friend, the businessman, did not get out because he went down to his boat and all the crew members turned out to be VC. He said that the last he knew his friend was working disguised as a cyclo driver, the Vietnamese equivalent of a rickshaw driver, in Saigon and living a very meager life. So, if I had tried that way out I wouldn't have made it. Anyway it was very touching that somebody offered me a way out.

But anyway, there was all this confusion in the final days. All these stories of people throwing babies over the fence at the airport to get them out, etc. which is all true. There was also a heightened sense of sorrow from various things that happened during the last couple of weeks. A few days before the final evacuation a C-5 loaded with orphans went down near the airport and many were killed. Also, a couple of days before the evacuation I got a call from the Australian ambassador saying that he was concerned that his friend, the Australian charg# in Laos had not shown up at Tan Son Nhut airport when he was supposed to meet him. So I started phoning our embassy in Laos and other sources. It developed that this plane had been shot down in the Highlands by the South Vietnamese for some reason and that his friend had probably been killed. So, after piecing things together I had to call back and tell him that his friend had been killed in this crash. This kind of sorrow for several days was pretty depressing for me.

Q: How about the consular section? I'm a former consul general there.

THOMPSON: They were working very hard. There was a line several people wide and a couple of blocks long in front of the consular section every day. I say this subject a little bit to correction, but people in the United States, of course, were sending in petitions to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for their Vietnamese relatives to get out. So the Americans would be told by the INS that it had approved their petition and sent it to the consular section in Saigon, so tell your relatives to go by the embassy and pick up their visas. Well, you couldn't pick up your visa if you were at the end of a line two blocks long. In the case of Vietnamese relatives of an American that I knew, Edward Height, I helped them bypass all this because I knew they were relatives of an American and they got on a bus at a certain spot and were taken to the airport and evacuated. But there was a mismatch between what was going on frantically in the Consular section in Saigon with the petitions piling up and the routine information being given to the families back in the United States.

Q: Were you privy to how Graham Martin was operating during these last days?

THOMPSON: In a sense what he thought was happening and what really did happen worked together. For example, he thought that the North Vietnamese would stop short of Saigon and negotiate a coalition government. The embassy would remain in place and keep functioning, working with this coalition government. Once it became clear this scenario was not true and the North...they paused a few hours until we finished our evacuation and then they came on in. They paused just outside Saigon to let us get out. Once it was clear that they were not negotiating and we were going to evacuate, things were really out of his hands. His only goal then was to evacuate as many people as possible because he felt that we owed it to these Vietnamese. The choppers went on and on evacuating people. There were several thousand people, including the famous bar girls from Mimi's, within the compound at that time. He wanted to make sure everyone possible would get out before we left. When I left there weren't very many people remaining, but they kept going for several more hours. Finally he was ordered by the President to leave because the chopper pilots and crews were far beyond the limits of endurance that they should have been observing in terms of flying. He was ordered to get out and he did get on a chopper. And then the battalion of marines who were guarding the embassy perimeters withdrew and the looters came in. There was a lot of talk about some people being shot at, etc. as we left the embassy. I certainly never saw any of that or felt in danger. There had been a lot of talk among Vietnamese who worked with Americans who said they were going to take the pin out of a grenade and hold it and stay with you until you are able to get me out, etc. The final day I didn't hear or see anything of that sort. The people around the embassy were peaceful, they were not shooting at us. They wanted to get out if they could, but they were not hostile as far as I can remember and not shooting at the choppers as they took off. So the evacuation went off, as far as I am concerned, in a rather peaceful way. Once you got up in the air there would be tracers coming up at you, but we were told we were above where they could reach.

On the last day the big symbolic act was cutting a certain tree down in the parking lot within the embassy compound to make room for the choppers to land. Of course, when you came to the embassy you were not allowed to park in that lot, there was another lot across the street. The choppers could land both on the parking lot and on the roof to take people off.

I took a chopper from the embassy roof about 9:00pm for about 45 minutes to a ship out in the South China Sea. There were tremendous flames and tracer bullets you could see out toward Long Binh where we had a large base which was obviously to some extent burning. There was a tremendous light show going on all around.

Q: Where did the ship take you?

THOMPSON: I went to what was called a landing ship dock, I can't remember the name of it although I have it written down somewhere. This is a boat whose purpose is to transfer troops from a troop ship to an aircraft carrier or to shore. Helicopters can land on its deck and the rear end comes down and six smaller boats can go out. So you could shuttle troops from a troop ship on to this ship and then they can get on the small boats and go ashore, for example. The military took more time than people expected to put the ships into position. You can't just put a boat off shore and simply take people off. You have to have a way for people to get on the boat. The helicopters would land on this boat and the Vietnamese would get out and go down to these smaller boats which would take them over to commercial vessels which had nets over the sides and they would climb up them. Then they were taken to Guam, which is ten sailing days away.

Vietnamese refugees had to go on to the commercial freighters, but American evacuees simply stayed on the ship that I was on. It had extra space. I had a bunk and was quite comfortable. The next day we were not far from an aircraft carrier and the South Vietnamese Air Force people loaded up planes and flew out to this aircraft carrier. You have heard the stories, they would land in a helicopter, they would all get off and then the

aircraft carrier crew would shove the helicopter into the ocean because they needed space for more helicopters to land. So the equipment couldn't be saved. This went on for several days and it was quite dramatic with various boats and the aircraft coming out from the shore to the fleet here to be rescued. Finally we were told to steam off to Subic Bay.

Have you talked to Francis “Terry” McNamara?

Q: Yes.

THOMPSON: He had quite a dramatic departure from the Delta. Some refugees in the end stayed on our boat, camping out on the deck until we got to the Philippines.

Q: Did you find yourself using Vietnamese to talk with them?

THOMPSON: Yes, to some extent. Once they got settled there wasn't all that much. I would go among them to see if they had any problems now and then. The ship provided them with food and a blanket apiece. They brought some stuff with them. Apparently most of them were Catholic and there was a priest who was their leader. He was the only one you needed to talk with. The Philippine government did not want any Vietnamese brought to the Philippines, but apparently the instructions to the U.S. ships stated that only Americans could be brought to the Philippines. This caused some problems because the chopper I was in included a Japanese diplomat. He had come that morning to the embassy on some liaison mission and then because of the crowds surrounding the embassy decided he couldn't leave. He could have climbed over the fence and probably gotten back to his embassy but I guess he didn't feel he should do that. So, he stayed at the embassy. When he got to the American vessel they would not let him stay on board, they made him go with the Vietnamese, as if he were going to Guam. But eventually he was located and plucked off a freighter after spending a couple of days with Vietnamese refugees. He became famous in the Japanese diplomatic service for the adventure of having been taken out of Saigon in this way. The rest of the Japanese were evacuated in a more orderly fashion. There was a French woman and her daughter, who I knew

very slightly, who had gotten to the ship earlier and the executive officer of the ship was insisting that they go with the Vietnamese because the Philippines had said only Americans. So there were these other people from other countries who really would have had no problems in the Philippines. I don't know where the French woman and her adult daughter ended up.

So, the evacuation from my point of view was quite orderly and successful.

Q: You went to the Philippines?

THOMPSON: We went to Subic Bay and had some processing there and then were flown to a Naval air station near Manila and then bussed to the embassy where we got hotel rooms. I spent a couple of days there before going back to Thailand as soon as I could to get back together with my family.

Q: And then what happened? Did you all go back to the States?

THOMPSON: Well, some people immediately went into the effort to help Vietnamese refugees. There was a refugee task force that was formed under Julia Taft. I went to Thailand and just felt drained. I stayed there with my family for two or three weeks. By that time my wife had an apartment. I stayed there until the rainy season came and I couldn't sun myself or go to the swimming pool any more, so we decided to go back to the United States. I had compensatory time and I used some of that. When I did go back to the States I was put on the Vietnamese Refugee Task Force for a month before I took up a regular State Department job.

Q: What were you doing with the task force?

THOMPSON: Well, I was working with Lionel Rosenblatt. He had a small group of inspectors and troubleshooters. I went to various camps around the United States to see how each camp was carrying out its processing and whether the procedures that one had

adopted would help another to do its processing faster. That was rather interesting. I did that for one month.

Q: How did you find the process worked to get the Vietnamese to work? It moved rather quickly didn't it?

THOMPSON: Well, you know the impressive thing was De Tocqueville was right about private organizations being so important in our society. There were a number of these refugee organizations, I hate to mention one and leave out others. The Catholic Charities, the Tolstoy, Lutherans, etc. were doing such a tremendous job of helping these refugees. Of course, the Lutherans were mostly from the northern United States, so the refugees would get from the north down to the south as soon as they could for the warmth. But these organizations were tremendously impressive in their capacity to absorb these refugees out of these camps. Again, the camps were usually set up by US military organizations who were just superb. So the camps were all doing well. I visited Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, and Indian Gap, or something, up in Pennsylvania and I felt everybody was doing a very good job in all of these locations to get these people processed and out into American society as soon as they possibly could.

Q: Why don't we stop at this point and we will pick it up with what you did back in Washington.

THOMPSON: All right.

Q: You had as assistant secretaries for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Phil Habib and Arthur Hummel. What were your impressions of these two major figures in our foreign affairs society.

THOMPSON: Well, I liked them very much. Phil Habib was one of the relatively few high ranking officers that talked frankly, directly and made sense every time. As they get promoted some people tend to engage in rhetorical flights that may or may not still

correspond with reality, but Phil was rooted in reality. I liked him very much and he was a very good person to work for. He didn't think much of this policy paper process I was carrying on as my major responsibility in the Office of Regional Affairs. In his view everybody had policy in his head for the area he was responsible for in his work and you didn't really need to try to set it all down on paper in a systematic way. So, I liked him very much. Now, Art Hummel is less of a flamboyant character, but very wise, very respected, a very nice person. I thought very highly of both of them.

Q: After two years at the State Department you went to Georgetown. What were you doing at Georgetown?

THOMPSON: In the Foreign Service, for better or worse, the European Bureau is considered the main bureau and where most of the action is. My education included two years in England and a year in France, so I had always vaguely assumed that I would get into the European Bureau. Whereas, when I came back from Saigon after 15 years in the Service, I found that unless you had at least one if not several tours when you were younger in a bureau you had very little chance of breaking into it as a mid-level officer. I had not realized the strength of the bureau identification. You need a home in a bureau. I could have continued in my East Asian home if I had wanted to, but I didn't know any East Asian languages except Vietnamese and didn't want to continue in that specialty. So to try to work into European affairs I was accepted as a student of European Government in the Department's University Training course. The Department sends out a number of people each year to universities. So I went into that program as a stepping stone for getting into the European Bureau.

Q: You are out of Vietnam?

THOMPSON: No, not really. We were studying European government so it wasn't much of an issue. Also, Georgetown is a relatively conservative place, if I may say so, so I don't recall any firebrand on the faculty. To the extent that there were political attitudes, I was

one of those liberal, wishy-washy cookie-pushers from the State Department as contrasted with the fire-breathing, National-Security-Council emphasizing Georgetown faculty, and there were one or two faculty members a little more of that sort.

Q: I understand you had a course with Jeane Kirkpatrick, who later became well-known as ambassador to the UN. What did you think of her?

THOMPSON: I had one evening course from her in French political institutions. She had had a junior year in France very similar to mine. She had a very good understanding, I felt, of French political institutions and I got a great deal out of her course.

Q: Then you came back, you had sort of brainwashed yourself or institutionalized yourself into the EUR business after you got yourself into the EUR Bureau?

THOMPSON: Yes. After a year of full time study at Georgetown, during the academic year 1977-78, I was made Irish Desk officer in the office of Northern European Affairs. I was responsible for Ireland and Sweden.

Q: That seems a strange combination.

THOMPSON: It was really just a matter of dividing up the work load in the office, but there is some logic to it because they are two neutral countries of Western Europe as opposed to the countries around them who by and large were members of NATO.

Q: You were there from 1978 to 1980. What were the main issues you had to deal with?

THOMPSON: Let me say a little bit about each of the countries. In Ireland, the fighting was more or less in full flow. It had begun, as you will recall, in 1969 and I was responsible for both Northern Ireland and Ireland. A combination of duties that made the British diplomats look a bit askance sometimes, since Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. But our main issue with the Republic of Ireland was what was happening in Northern Ireland. So it made sense and I visited both Dublin and Belfast. We figured we had done our job

if we kept the fatalities below 100 a year. It was really a job that involved a great deal of congressional contact. Congressional letters, meetings with staffers, etc. defending the administration's policy. And we had the great support of certain Irish-American politicians who had issued a statement a year or two earlier urging Irish-Americans not to contribute to the IRA because that was contributing to violence in Ireland. Speaker Tip O'Neill, Pat Moynihan, and Senator Kennedy were Irish-Americans taking the lead in that. So that was a very good basis for me in dealing with the Irish-American community which was often critical of the US for allegedly coddling the UK for its human rights abuses in Northern Ireland. So that was the main issue in Ireland.

In Sweden it was very interesting because Sweden, although formally neutral, had a lot of quiet cooperation with the United States and with NATO. The main issues that would come up with Sweden were to what degree we sold them advanced technology to use to replace their old equipment, especially fighter planes. So that was a whole different area of “diplomacy” but a very important issue.

Q: Was the assumption at the time in case the balloon went up that Sweden would be a problem?

THOMPSON: At a minimum one could expect Sweden to stay neutral. In order to avoid violating its neutrality, the Russians would be forced to go way up north and attack through Norway over very difficult terrain, or to come through to the south where you have not only Denmark, but Germany and narrow straits in the Baltic Sea. So, Sweden formed quite a strong barrier if the Russians tried to go through Sweden. They had a very advanced airplane, of course, and probably would have given a good account of themselves against the Russian troops. So Sweden was an important military adjunct to NATO forces.

Q: Did you find we had a problem with Swedish attitudes on Vietnam?

THOMPSON: There had been very strong feelings during the Vietnam war, but by the time I came on the scene in 1980, three years after the so-called fall of Saigon, the issue had receded into the past.

Q: Just one question on the Irish situation. Did we have a policy or was it basically to be nice to the British and the Irish government and hoping for the best?

THOMPSON: Well, we were quietly encouraging everybody who was non-violent to talk to each other. I don't recall any very active American policy. It was really up to the people involved to do their own talking. There were private efforts to get Protestants and Catholics together in Northern Ireland, talking in various groups. That went on for a period of years and hopefully had some effect.

Q: You were in EUR from 1978-80, what did you do then?

THOMPSON: Well, we have a system whereby a list is put out with all available postings that will be open and you draw up a list of ten or fifteen things you might want to do and then perhaps make some contacts to see if you can get them. I made up such a list and went in to the EUR personnel officer and went down the list of things that I might be interested in. Every post in Europe that I said I was interested in he would say, “Bag job,” meaning it is in the bag for somebody else already, don't bother. So I started looking more broadly around the world and found this job as political counselor in Algiers, French required, no Arabic required, for your diplomatic duties French was sufficient. So after the first wave of bidding, and I didn't get any of the European jobs, they were all sewed up already through connections, I put in my name for this job in Algiers and was immediately snapped up by the Near Eastern Bureau. It appears that the career Near Eastern hands did not want to go to Algiers. I think that besides being an uncomfortable place to live, the ambassador there had treated his staff in such a way that I guess old hands didn't want to go there.

Q: When did you arrive in Algiers?

THOMPSON: It would have been the summer of 1980, probably July or August, and I spent a two-year tour there.

Q: What was our policy towards Algeria at that time?

THOMPSON: Well, at the time of the 1967 war...

Q: Arab-Israeli war of 1967.

THOMPSON: In 1967 all the Arab countries cut relations with the United States, and we established an interests section technically in the Swiss embassy, but physically located in our old embassy building. In 1974 we renewed diplomatic relations directly with Algeria. When I got there in 1980, we had an embassy but still no Marine Guards, which they do have now in Algiers. We didn't have Marine Guards so we were not quite a full-fledged embassy like in other countries. But we had pretty much the full range. We had a military attach#, etc.

The basically military government of Algeria at that time still also claiming to represent the FLN, the Liberation Party, was really a fairly cautious and conservative government. There had been a recent election which had brought to power the senior colonel in the army (they had no generals) as the president. He and his associates were relatively conservative people and were trying to slowly bring Algeria out of the socialist state-directed economy, tight straitjacket that they had been in before. So they were gradually liberalizing the economy. But it was pretty tough. Living there was very close to living in Eastern Europe, according to people who had been there. Both sides wanted to gradually improve relations. I should mention that economic relations were very important because we were a big customer for Algerian oil and natural gas. So we had an important economic tie.

Q: Before we move to the Iran hostage business, how did you find when you got there contacts with Algerians? I have always heard that they were more like the Syrians, rather dour people? How was your entree to doing your work?

THOMPSON: Officialdom tended to be reserved with spots of greater friendliness. The people who dealt with the oil interests all spoke fluent English, which is the language of the oil industry around the world, and would deal with our delegations and embassy on the oil issue. On strict foreign policy issues we would deal with the Foreign Ministry and the Directorate which was responsible for relations with the United States was quite friendly and open in that they would receive us at rather short notice and hear our demarches on whatever issue we wanted to raise. Other parts of the Foreign Ministry tended to be somewhat suspicious, although now and then we could have an entree with them. In previous years the Foreign Minister almost never saw an American Ambassador, but that gradually opened up when I was there, especially during the Iran-hostage event.

In general, in Algerian officialdom, I think there was great concern on the part of the officials that relationships with the Americans might be unfortunate for their careers. So I think Algerian officials in general were very leery of being seen with us, except perhaps in dealing with some issue that was very much in the Algerian national interest.

Now in the political realm, of course there was only one legal political party, but old-timers who had been in the Algerian revolution and were assured of their own political position were much more relaxed about seeing us. So there were a few retired colonels, and businessman, etc. who were quite glad to talk to Americans. I guess their positions were so firm that they didn't have the same concern as the Algerian official would have.

Coupled with this political reticence was, I think, the fact that Arabs do tend to focus on their own family, more broadly on their own village. Saddam Hussein runs his country with people from his own village. That sort of thing I think plays a role, so that Arabs generally tend to be reserved about making new friends and getting much outside the circle of

people that they know very well as symbolized by the high walls around their houses and compounds.

Whenever anyone said, “Well, I have a good Algerian friend,” the person would generally turn out to be not Arab but Berber. The Berbers were in Northern Africa before the Arabs came in. Morocco is probably mostly Berber and the people are much more friendly than in most Arab countries. In Algeria there is a group called the Kabylie who had a leading role in...they tended to be much more educated, many of them were civil servants even under the French, and they are widely represented in the officialdom. The Kabylie are Berbers, not Arabs, and tend to be more open to foreigners than the average Arab.

Q: How did you find being political counselor there? Was it interesting?

THOMPSON: Well, I thoroughly enjoyed it. Algeria had a very active role in world affairs. It considered itself one of the leaders of the non-aligned countries in the world, and they were one of the relatively few countries that would approach an international conference or issue the same way the United States would, i.e. figure out a position well ahead of time, send cables around the world with demarches to a lot of countries trying to persuade them to take the same approach at the conference, and then they come to the conference with large delegations and then assign liaison responsibilities to massage all the other delegations to try to make their point of view prevail. So they were an important actor on the world diplomatic scene beyond the size of the country. At the same time, they had a definite position on a lot of issues, usually somewhat different from the US position. So a lot of our discussions were pretty cut-and-dried. We would have instructions to go in and talk to them. We would do it, but we knew what their position was and they knew what we were going to say, so we were very often just going through the motions in a sense, but you had to do it so that everybody would continue to know what the positions were and they were showing a little movement on some issues and we were happy to encourage that. Then, of course, the Iran issue became one in which we cooperated very closely.

Q: I have heard in many of my interviews the Foreign Service people speak very highly of the Algerian Foreign Service. Why is this?

THOMPSON: Well, remember they were at war for years. It is very similar to our revolution, even before the revolution the American states had envoys to countries in Europe other than Britain, so we had some diplomatic experience in that way. Then American diplomats during the war were trying to encourage French and Dutch support for the revolution. When we gained independence, this experience gave us a cadre of people who had been engaged in diplomatic efforts for some years. Algeria had the same thing. They had representatives around the world who had been advancing the Algerian cause against the official French diplomatic line in various countries around the world. They had a long period of negotiations on their own independence. When they became independent, they had people who had been in effect diplomats already for years. Once they became independent, I think they followed the French system of a very centralized educational system where top people go into certain areas...in France the top people become inspecteurs de finances, whatever that is, a very high government position which is of immediate importance. I think the second or third thing people go into is diplomacy, so I think this mandarinal system encouraged very intelligent Algerians to go in to diplomacy. I think they are also probably encouraged by the fact that life in Algeria is very uncomfortable, so if you have the chance of living abroad part of your life, you probably tried to do so. For whatever reason they did have very, very able diplomats and that fit into what I said earlier about their role in the world.

Then you asked why they wanted to get involved in the Iran hostage situation.

Q: Because this is a history, you might want to explain briefly what the Iran hostage situation was.

THOMPSON: Well, I am trying to remember the exact timing.

Q: November, 1979 was when our embassy was taken over.

THOMPSON: Okay, well in November, 1979, Iranian militants, in the beginning I don't think they were fully supported by their government, took over the US embassy in Tehran and took hostage the Americans therein. There were also three or four Americans from the embassy, including the charg#, Bruce Laingen, in the Foreign Ministry at that time and they were held there under better accommodations than those at the embassy, but nevertheless they couldn't leave the Ministry.

The Algerians were interested in this because they had been closely involved in relations between Iran and Iraq. They had brought about a peace agreement between those two countries which had been broken by Iraq when the war between Iran and Iraq broke out. The Algerians felt very concerned about that because they were the people who had brokered the agreement which was broken by that war. As a result of that war, most Arab countries sided with Iraq and broke relations with Iran, but not Algeria. So Algeria was one of the few Arab countries that had relations with Iran and they felt, in a broader sense, that they wanted to bring Iran with its extremist revolution back into the world diplomatic community. A big obstacle to that was the fact that the Iranian government was holding American diplomats as hostages, which made Iran something of an outcast to the world. So the Algerians were not doing this to be nice to Americans, but for their broader interest of uniting Muslims and bringing Iran back into the community of nations. They felt they should help Iran find a way to get around this obstacle of having these Americans as hostages. So they played a very active role in mediating between the United States and Iran.

There were several rounds of discussions in which they acted as mediators in the course of 1980. These were led on the American side by Warren Christopher, the Deputy Secretary of State, who was the point man for the administration on this issue. So there were several rounds of discussion. Christopher came a couple of times to Algiers where it was easy to communicate quickly with the Iranians through the Algerian Foreign Ministry,

but these efforts had been unsuccessful. In early December, as I recall, we got instructions for our Charg# then, Chris Ross, now ambassador to Syria, to go to the Foreign Ministry and ask them if the Carter Administration should make one last effort to arrive at an agreement, or whether they should just give up and leave it to the Reagan administration —Reagan had already been elected by then.

By then the American officials involved were rather weary of the situation and the Algerians also. Chris Ross and I called on the Secretary General of the Foreign Ministry and delivered this message—should we keep trying or just let the next administration handle this. The Algerians said, “Well, let us think about it.” They came back the next day and said that they thought it was worthwhile to try again. So, there were various exchanges back and forth trying to lay the groundwork for this. Finally in January, Warren Christopher came over with a delegation for a few days of discussion which went pretty much day and night.

Q: January 20 is when the new administration would come in.

THOMPSON: Yes, that is right. So it was a few days before that that Christopher came back because the preliminary discussions had shown promise. He spent most of his time at the Foreign Ministry with his delegation meeting with the Algerians who had direct connections with Tehran. Those of us at the embassy were largely in a support role, driving people around and carrying documents back and forth, etc. Almost a day and night operation for several days. In fact, finally an agreement was reached. There were some amazing aspects to that. There was a Treasury delegation that came in when it looked like things were showing some success, headed by an American Treasury official, but it included two lawyers who represented the American banking system. A whole complicated arrangement had been arrived at whereby at the right moment when the hostages were out, a button would be pushed and billions of dollars would flow from various places around the world to a special account in London which would be held to pay off Iranian claims. It was really an amazing agreement with all kinds of complex aspects to it. Under

the agreement then, an Algerian airplane went to Tehran to pick up the Americans and there was some delay there, but they finally got on the plane and flew to Algiers. The plane did not take off until Carter was out and Reagan was in, I guess because of their animosity against Carter. So the plane then flew to Algiers. The hostages got off the plane and came into the VIP lounge at the airport and there was a ceremony there in which the Algerians handed them over to the Americans and they then got on an American aircraft and flew to Wiesbaden where they were medically checked out before going back to the United States.

Unfortunately for me in a sense, I was the one staff member left back at the embassy instead of going to the airport. I had an open telephone line to Washington in case something came up and we needed to communicate with the Department. It turned out Department officials were watching TV and telling me what was going on out at the airport as I sat in the embassy in Algiers. All three American networks had been there for some time covering these talks, so they were on the scene.

Q: Did this really magnificent assistance out of a very difficult situation for the United States do anything to change our relations with Algeria?

THOMPSON: I think it gave a great jump start to our gradually improving relations. The Algerian embassy in Washington was flooded with handwritten letters of thanks to the Algerians from school children from all over the country. We received many similar letters at our embassy in Algiers which we handed over to the Foreign Ministry. We couldn't begin to answer them all, but there was a tremendous outpouring of American gratitude to Algiers for their mediation in this. These sorts of things don't last very long, but they are very uplifting and encouraging when they do happen.

On the official level the new Reagan Administration was a little less friendly on ideological grounds toward Algeria than the Carter administration had been. So Algeria did not get

any direct economic benefits in the negotiations on the price of gas, etc. out of this. It may have encouraged them to some degree in their efforts to liberalize their own economy.

Q: How did you and the embassy feel about the relations between Algeria and France at that time?

THOMPSON: Well, overall between Algeria and France there is a love/hate relationship because Algerians loved French culture and would visit France if they could, and there were hundreds of thousands living in France, but at the same time there was a sharp gradually decreasing but still sharp, ideological difference between the still socialist, repressive Algerians and the capitalist and democratic French. I would say they had pretty good relations while I was there. They had a large embassy, a large establishment of French teachers, etc.

One very interesting footnote to their relations is the domestic relationship problem. The Algerian students in France would from time to time, and there are hundreds of such cases, marry French women. If the French woman came back to Algeria she was virtually the slave of her mother-in-law under Algerian custom which she would find difficult. But if the French wife went back to France she couldn't take their children because the Algerians very much wanted to keep the children. If there was a divorce in France the father would try to keep the children and take them back to Algeria. So the French had a very large number of very complicated custody cases. It was rather nice that both parents wanted the children instead of abandoning them, but it was really heartbreaking for the people involved and a great thorn in the side for the French embassy and the consul general who was trying to deal with these family problems.

Q: Did we have any of these problems?

THOMPSON: I can't remember any such. We had a couple of Americans in prison while I was there that the consul would visit regularly, but I don't recall that sort of problem.

Q: What was the relationship with Qadhafi and Libya at that time?

THOMPSON: Well, the Algerians called him a crazy man in private, but again it is a little bit like their relationship with Iran. They wanted Libya to moderate its behavior somewhat and move more into the family of nations. So again they were trying to mediate between the US and Libya. At one point General Vernon Walters, who I think had the title of Ambassador at Large at that time and undertook various missions for President Reagan, went to Algeria basically with some photographs of Libyan military preparations, etc. designed to alarm the Algerians and get them to show more concern about their Libyan neighbor. He wrote a good cable at that time something like, “My meetings with Benjedid and Qadhafi.” Benjedid was the president of Algeria and Walters had a meeting with him to carry out his instruction, but also while driving through town he saw Qadhafi surrounded by his female bodyguards walking down the street. He didn't actually meet him, but he saw him, so General Walters had a sense of humor and put meeting with Qadhafi in the title of his cable. In a little paragraph he put something about seeing Qadhafi downtown in the cable and I think it probably caused something of a jolt in Washington when they received this cable.

Vernon Walters is a great character, as you know. I don't know if he is appropriate for your series or not.

Q: Oh, yes, we are trying to get him.

THOMPSON: You should set more than a few hours, a week aside if you really want to record the full flavor of his life.

Q: What about the other side, Morocco, at that time?

THOMPSON: Relations were gradually improving. The two countries were divided over the issue of the Western Sahara, one of the less-known conflicts around the world. There was the former colony of Spanish Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania and when

the Spaniards left the country, the Moroccans and Mauritania both claimed part of it. The Mauritanians soon gave up their claim and while I was there, it was claimed by Morocco on the one hand and on the other hand by a group called the Polisario, the liberation organization of the Sahrawi people, who are from the Western Sahara and supported by Algeria. Most of the Sahrawi people seemed to be in a tent city near Tindouf just over the border in Algeria. Algeria was giving them support in their military efforts against Morocco. Morocco and Algeria were gradually giving this conflict a lesser place in their relations and trying to develop relations. I can't remember if they had diplomats in each other capitals while I was there or not. They were improving relations and may even have established political relations. So they were gradually improving. The Western Sahara dispute is still with us today. In theory everybody has agreed on a referendum, but there is a big dispute over who will vote in a referendum. Morocco has poured settlers into the area, can they vote? Will it only be people who were registered earlier as Sahrawi? It is still an issue but one in which other countries...there is some effort to find a solution at the very least.

Q: I recall that there were some congressional staffers who were in important positions who sort of took the Polisario position as one of their own. Did you run across any of this?

THOMPSON: If so, I don't recall it.

Q: I may be way off about this. Well, what about something that now has become quite a serious matter in Algeria, Islamic fundamentalists, and sort of anti-Westernism. Was that much worse, were we seeing that as a problem?

THOMPSON: We were seeing it as a growing problem. When I was there there would be fundamentalist activity here and there around the country. They would seize a mosque on the edge of the desert and after some time the government police or troops would retake the mosque and maybe someone would be killed. So there was sporadic violence now and then around the country and cassettes were being circulated from Iran promoting fundamentalism, but it was not a nation-wide movement. I remember one report reviewing

the possible threats to the government from various sources, and the one group that did appear capable of posing a threat to the government was fundamentalism, if they got organized on a national basis. Now, apparently that did happen since I was there.

Policywise I think our government policy is correct. Now we are—as you will recall there was an election and from the results of the first round it looked like the fundamentalists were poised to win. So the second round of the election was canceled and a military government was formed to block their victory. We have been pushing this government to negotiate with the fundamentalists, and try to proceed with democracy and forming a government representing the people. The French have been much more concerned about a possible fundamentalist government and have been more supportive of the military government as a reasonable alternative. I think it just shows what happens when you suppress the democratic feelings of the people, you encourage this terrorism which is now taking place. A number of foreigners are being killed. Our own embassy is now pretty much restricted to two compounds on either side of a street. Everybody lives there, they don't live around town in houses the way they used to. Dependents have been sent out and the American School is closed. So Algiers is not a desirable post to work in right now. It takes an armored convoy to take people to and from the airport. It is a country which has come to symbolize the possible conflict in countries where fundamentalism is important between democracy on the one hand versus the danger that once you let the fundamentalists in they will create a theocracy which will be perhaps inimical to Western interests and certainly to Western values, and which will not permit any further free elections.

Q: How about the Soviets? What was their influence there as we saw it then?

THOMPSON: It was important but again fortunately waning. There was a large Soviet embassy and the Algerians bought most of their military equipment from the Soviets, but they were gradually shifting to us. While I was there they bought several C-130s and that was a big break-through. These were large cargo transports used by both military and

civilian organizations around the world. Our planes were much better than Soviet planes. Soviet tanks and AK47s were probably pretty good. But on the other hand, we have the best airplanes.

Q: AK47s are an assault rifle.

THOMPSON: Yes, that is right. The Soviets had been supporters of the Algerian revolution and that carried over as main suppliers of their military equipment. The Algerian government obviously was wanting to diversify sources for military equipment to improve its relations with the United States and reduce dependence on the Soviets, so they were buying these C-130s while I was there. There was a Soviet submarine which had been for years in a harbor in eastern Algeria and we never knew really quite why it was there. But, on the other hand, the Algerians were gradually reducing the Russian influence in the country.

Q: Who was the ambassador while you were there?

THOMPSON: Until late January, 1981, it was Ulric Haynes, Jr., who came from Cummins International, which is a large company selling stationary generating plants and engines, and who went back to them afterward. He was quite an active and dynamic person. He had a Haitian wife, spoke very good French and has remained active in public life in various ways. He stayed only a few days after January 20, because he said that he couldn't stand being there with Reagan president. Once the hostages were released on the 20th, he packed up and left within a few days.

We had Christopher Ross as charg# for eight months and then Michael Newlin, a career ambassador, arrived around October, 1981 and was the ambassador the rest of the time I was there.

Q: You left there in 1982, is that right?

THOMPSON: Yes, the summer of 1982, a two year tour.

Q: And then back to European Affairs.

THOMPSON: Yes, I did come back to European Affairs and served as Greek Desk officer for two years.

Q: As an old Greek hand myself, I spent four years in Athens, I can't think of a worse can of worms than Greek affairs. For a small country they work very hard to get us involved. They have a very strong lobby here, etc. What was the situation in Greece at that time and what were the things you were having to deal with?

THOMPSON: It was similar to my earlier tour on Irish affairs, in a way, because again the domestic component was very important, as you say. I was in regular touch with the Greek-American organizations, which was always a pleasure because they are certainly very nice people. Again, a lot of the attention had to be focused on the congressional interest in our relations between Greece and Turkey. One of the biggest events was the renegotiation of our bases agreement with Greece. That was carried out on our side by Reginald Bartholomew, now ambassador to Italy. I don't think he was in the Foreign Service at that time, but he had been involved in diplomatic efforts of various sorts for quite a while under various administrations, and was a very able man. So he carried the burden of these base negotiations with Greece. They had a recently elected prime minister, Andreas Papandreou, who had a 1960s American wife whom he had met while a professor in the United States, who was farther to the left than he was and led the women's movement of the party.

So it was a matter of accommodating. I think Greek basic interests were still to have us there because they didn't want us to lose our ties with Greece completely and go over to the Turkish side. We had a balancing act because Turkey played a very important role in the NATO plans. It was on the southern flank of the Soviet Union and if we could

keep a good, strong Turkish military establishment in place as a constant threat to the Soviets, it would at a minimum make it difficult for them to move south and at a maximum conceivably be a beachhead for NATO to attack them from the south. So Turkey was a very important country, also important in Middle Eastern affairs, for the United States, but Turkey didn't have the congressional and political support the Greeks had, so Congress always insisted that our aid to Turkey had to be balanced in a certain ratio with aid to Greece. My main efforts were really bureaucratic, for example, we had some airplanes that were obsolete from our point of view, but still useful to Greece and Turkey. What share of them would each country get? Even though Turkey really needed them more, we had to give some to Greece to keep the Greek lobbyists off our backs. So, again, a lot of what I had to do was dealing with the domestic political pressures rather than with the country, itself.

Q: We have real Greek hands who have been involved for a long time, and Turkish hands. Did you find when you got there it was hard not to absorb the Greek cause within the bureaucratic world or did you have to fight the tendency to see things through Greek eyes?

THOMPSON: This sort of thing does happen and I think the people in our embassy in Athens...I think it is an almost inevitable part of the Foreign Service when you are in a country and constantly bombarded by the country's point of view. Of course, your duty is to convey that point of view to Washington. Now and then in a minority of cases you come to dislike the people rather than adopt their point of view. On the Greek Desk I think we were pretty objective for two reasons. One, I was from the outside and didn't have any prejudices as I came into the job, and secondly, the old Greek hands were very often old Turkish hands as well. My immediate superior, the deputy director, had served in both Greece and Turkey and spoke both languages. So they had a pretty good overall view. The other area in which these differences constantly were manifesting themselves were in NATO exercises. Presumably they were partners in NATO but Greece and Turkey have very differing views of territorial issues and law of the sea issues within the Aegean Sea between them, so there were constant problems in dealings with NATO maneuvers, etc.

What our fleet in the Mediterranean did as part of these maneuvers was the subject of constant disputes between Greece and Turkey and we couldn't help but become involved.

An anecdote. As part of my initial consultations I had a trip to Greece, of course, and I went through Naples to talk with the political advisor to CINCSOUTH, our commander at Naples who commanded our fleet in the Mediterranean. As soon as I got into the POLAD's office I was immediately ushered into the office of the admiral himself, Admiral Crowe. He said that 60 percent of his time was spent on Greek/Turkish issues, so if the Greek Desk Officer from the State Department came through he wanted to talk with him. So we had a good talk.

Q: What was your impression of Andreas Papandreou?

THOMPSON: Well, I think people didn't like him but as diplomats we had to deal with him. I find it hard to say much beyond that. He was in part a product of the 1960s American campuses. His wife more than he. Once the Greek civil war was won by the right, the rightist supporters kept control there for many years and when Papandreou was elected it was a bursting forth of forces that had been penned up for a long time. As time went on I think they became more mature and cooled off, but it was quite an event when he was first elected.

Q: Did you get any feeling that the Reagan administration had any Greek policy or was it just something to deal with?

THOMPSON: Well, when I came in the administration had been in power for some time, so I don't have any feel for differences between one administration from another.

Q: You sort of hopped around. All of a sudden in 1984 you left EUR and spent three years in ARA. How did that come about?

THOMPSON: Earlier when I was talking about coming back from Vietnam and realizing that having a home in a bureau was so important to your career, I hadn't realized how strong that was before then. So, coming out of the Greek Desk and being an FSO-1, there are only so many positions around the world for people at that level. As I looked at possibilities the only other position that definitely developed was political counselor in Monrovia, Liberia. I felt that a deputy officer director position was more enhancing for the possibility of promotion—most chances of showing management skills, etc... I wanted to be a deputy director officer and there was a choice between the ARA bureau or the AF bureau. They had exactly the same job open, so I had a choice between the two. I chose ARA because at that time...this was an office dealing with military assistance to Latin America, and at that time we had large and very active programs going for Central America so I thought there was more action in Central America than there was in Africa at that time in terms of bureaucratic visibility. That was a two year tour. By the time the two years were up, it was clear that I was not going to be promoted into the Senior Foreign Service, and I simply extended for a third year in that same job as being as good a springboard as any because nobody else would want someone for a one year tour. So I kept the deputy director position as I was job hunting on the outside.

Q: Were you in charge of regional policy?

THOMPSON: Well, ARA had two regional offices, and one of them was headed by Luigi Einaudi, who is very well known and is now deputy director of the policy planning staff, previously ambassador to the Organization of American States. His office dealt with regional policy in ARA. When I was there they had a separate regional office which dealt with resource issues. We worked with the economic office to develop the annual plans for economic and military assistance and presentation documents for congress, etc. Our office also was responsible on a regional basis for several areas such as human rights, UN affairs, and the anti-drug struggle. Just at the time I was leaving in 1987, my office was merged with the other one I mentioned headed by Luigi Einaudi so ARA would have one

regional political office instead of two, making it more similar to the other bureaus, and probably streamlining as well.

Q: What were the main concerns that you were dealing with during the 1984-87 period?

THOMPSON: One was Central America. We had large amounts of assistance going into those countries and it was a matter of how you divided it up among them. And our military assistance programs and what would constitute them in terms of arms sales and military assistance of various sorts and exercises by the National Guard that went on in Central America. There was an annual exercise to develop our plans and present them to congress. During that time also there was a revolution in Haiti so it was kind of interesting trying to squeeze some money out of relatively small budgets, mainly for Caribbean countries to, increase our assistance to Haiti to try to encourage them towards democracy. That involved an effort to look at a number of programs and try to shift resources, which was an important effort at a certain time. It failed, unfortunately, the military government there did not move toward democracy. It seemed worthwhile at the time.

Q: During the Reagan administration there was tremendous concern about the situation in Nicaragua and El Salvador at the time. Did you find that this was sort of a political mine field as far as being in ARA at that time?

THOMPSON: Well, I came in after the earthquake, so to speak, when the Reagan administration came in. They had swept aside all the high ranking people that had been dealing with the issues in the Carter administration and put in their own people, both ambassadors and the higher ranking levels in Washington. I came in after this had already happened and I was in a pretty technical capacity. You could feel the passions swirling around you, however. There were groups strongly assailing the administration's policy in Central America, maintaining that we were helping countries that were committing human rights violations. All those issues were certainly going on and there was a very large and unusual public relations effort that had been mounted in the Department with speakers

being sent out on a regular basis and a lot of slick paper publications put out too, reporting what we were doing in Central America and pointing out that most of the Contras were local farmers and not former members of Somoza's national guard and this sort of thing. So it was a pretty strong political issue. I would prepare briefing books for Congress and I might go up with the assistant secretary to testify, but he was the one under the gun, not me. In the end, I think the Reagan administration in an imperfect way was successful as we do have to some degree democratic governments in Nicaragua and El Salvador these days, although they are certainly fragile and not yet deeply rooted institutions. But I think things have gone the right way at a considerable price.

Q: What about human rights? This was the time we were accusing sort of rightist movements and all, who had a rather bad human rights record. How did you find the human rights issue?

THOMPSON: Well, it is difficult because you are trying to support a government fighting an insurgency in El Salvador. El Salvador was the key problem country where you had the government to some degree probably condoning activities of the right wing groups and death squads. But at the same time you need to give that government support to keep back the actual communist insurgency, the last major surge of Cold War activity before the Soviet Union dissolved. So, it is very difficult and we faced it in other places around the world. We were constantly pressing the governments to curtail these groups, and they did. The death squad activity went down sharply at the time the Reagan administrative became really active in the early eighties giving aid to that government. But it still existed and still exists to some extent. The Reagan administration had just been elected so they were able to go ahead despite the critics. But it was not an easy situation.

Q: During most of the time you were there was Elliott Abrams the ARA assistant secretary?

THOMPSON: That's right.

Q: What was your impression of how he operates? He became quite a controversial issue later on.

THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. I think to start with he was very young and inexperienced, you know. I think his heart was probably in the right place, he had been the assistant Secretary for Human Rights previously. But I think some of the things he did and some of the problems he got himself involved in were a result of his lack of experience in a bureaucracy and how you need to behave and balance competing interests.

The relatively few times I was in meetings with him or had personal dealings with him I found him reasonable and personable. So I don't have any personal feelings about him one way or the other. He was always nice to me, so to speak. I think the whole effort, there was such a sharp division between Congress and the Republican administration that the Republicans felt that they were beating back godless communism and most anything was justified by this higher aim, as shown in the case of Colonel North, of course. I know that Abrams, North and a CIA man had tripartite meetings in which they would plan out what they would do in Central America and a lot of these key things were kept very clandestine and as we saw in the end went beyond the bounds of legality. So, I think Abrams' inexperience shows that you have to be very careful who you put into these important positions.

Q: How about Jesse Helms, Republican Senator from South Carolina, was he a factor that you were aware of?

THOMPSON: I don't recall. I can't think of any involvement of his in Central America.

Q: Did Castro and Cuba come up, or was this pretty much a write off?

THOMPSON: Well, we were constantly attempting to use human rights issues to assail the Castro regime. At the UN we had quite an effort going, which I think had some success, to get the UN to name Cuba a country of human rights concern. The UN tended to focus

on Israel, and South Africa, and ignored human rights in communist countries. So, we were carrying on a strong campaign to get them to look more broadly, including third world countries, for violations. I think there was some success in the course of the 1980's. That was the main effect with regard to Cuba that I was aware of.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to cover while in this job?

THOMPSON: No, there is nothing really outstanding from my point of view and of general interest.

Q: All right, why don't we stop at this point.

THOMPSON: Fine.

End of interview